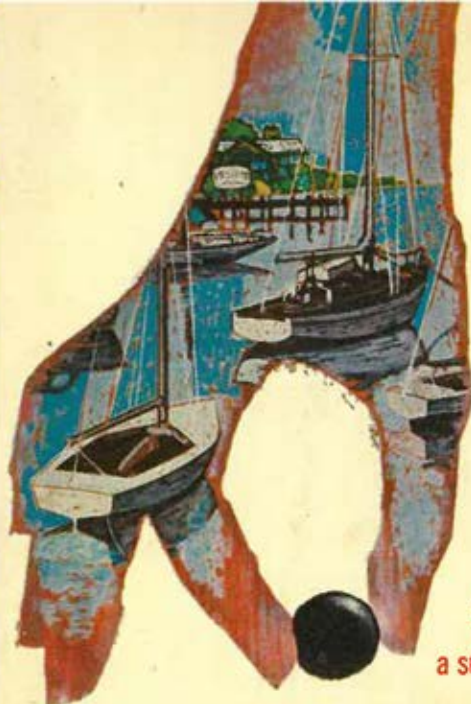


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# THE RIGHT BURGEE

by Henry Lee

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## THAT'S JUST A RELIC—

Al's voice was flat. "Just a minute, sir!"

"Yes, Al?"

"That beautifully hand-worked machine of solid mahogany on the mantel behind you."

"This is unheard of! In all my years on this Board, I have never seen that machine used. It's just a conversation piece left over from the old days."

Al looked Peabody levelly in the eyes. "Let's not be fastidious, sir. It has only one name. The *blackball* machine. I now stand on my rights as a Director. I demand that it be passed around the table."

For a moment there was absolute silence. Everybody looked towards Peabody. Grudgingly he nodded.

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# THE RIGHT BURGEE

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Henry Lee



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## THE RIGHT BURGEE

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## ► *Preface*

I am the founder and only flesh-and-blood member of the Housatonic Yacht and Tennis Club, which is a fictional amalgam of much correspondence and many conversations I have had with officers and members of various clubs, sports, social and cultural, throughout the country. Any resemblance to any commodores, directors, or club members, living or dead—even me!—would be the wildest coincidence. Please believe me and pass on the word. It will be one of those rare opportunities to practice simultaneously the virtues of truth and charity.

HENRY LEE

JULY
MONDAY
4
Independence Day

To the tall, lean, muscular man on the stilts, the warm, familiar sounds were almost overpowering.

At best, the Housatonic Yacht and Tennis Club was noisy, and today all the loud and incompatible Groups had turned out, bringing the children with them.

There were the boatmen, very jaunty and superior in their blues, and the sweaty tennis crowd; the swimmers who left little puddles at the snack bar as they gulped their Pepsis, and the family members and the drinkers; all the Irish Catholics, and most of the Protestants.

At Housatonic, today was the cacophonous high point of the season that had been building up since Memorial Day, and each Group, with its weapon of choice, stridently competed to make as much noise as possible.

In the crowded harbor, aflutter with dozens of swallowtail blue and white Club burgees, the stinkpots were impatiently honking for the launch to fetch them ashore.

From the tennis courts came the *pong-pong-pong* of fast, hard rallies and happy shouts of the racquetters, few of whom observed the cricket-like decorum of well-mannered tennis.

As he waddled awkwardly closer on his stilts, Al Babcock saw Margie playing in the third court. Couldn't very well miss her in that unnecessarily short tennis skirt that made her such a distracting opponent in the mixed doubles.

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"Mommy! Mom-my!"

From the sidelines Margie's five-year-old, her youngest by her third marriage now terminated, was wailing for attention.

A net ball from the next court bobbled to Margie's feet. Graciously, she scooped it up with her racquet and returned it, then attended to her maternal duties.

"Go to the snack bar, baby, and get a hot dog or something. Mother will be along soon."

Well, with Margie, first things always came first. First men, then clothes, then tennis, and finally the children.

Rightfully, this well-bred tramp should not have been welcome at HY&T. But she was well bred, she came from a good family—and there's something the proper, lower-middle-class pusher, who puts his trust in regular church attendance and the other status hash marks of respectability, will never understand. If the sinning is not too grossly public, Yankee society is remarkably tolerant in accepting the sinner provided he or she is their own, and Margie was Housatonic's own.

Al didn't want to get tangled up with her again. Between them was one of those attraction-repulsion things going back to childhood. It was damned distracting that she was generally available, and though he felt virtuous whenever he conquered temptation, he also felt a masculine twinge of regret that he was passing up something.

To Margie, Al posed the challenge of the chase more than most men did. She knew he liked her and didn't want to admit it and wouldn't come voluntarily to her. That would have been flattering, of course, but there was a deeper, abandoned excitement in pursuing and arousing the reluctant male.

Before she saw him, Al veered uncertainly toward the pool and the soft plops of divers following each other off the ten-foot board.

Funny, he thought, getting his mind off this attractive bitch, every sport has its own sharp, identifying sound. There's the authoritative crack of a base hit, the melodious

snap of a 250-yard drive. Even in a crowded stadium, you can catch the satisfactory thud of a long, well-kicked punt. A bowling strike is subdued thunder, and fast-played ping pong, for that matter, sings a clear soprano *tock-tock*.

Abruptly, a metallic voice on the loudspeaker overrode all the other noises, announcing that the Junior swim meet was just starting. There was a stirring among the family-member Group, a nondescript gaggle of beaming fathers and mothers. Expectantly, they reported at the pool to cheer their offspring and to judge whether the expensive private lessons had been worthwhile.

Now Al heard a firing gun and, immediately afterwards, loud splashings. In the pure music of well-played sports, the flat, bellywhacking racing dive was a sloppy and deplorable exception.

Ordinarily, in token deference to its withering Victorian tradition, Housatonic Yacht and Tennis kept the children decently penned along the beach and in the pool. Today, with all the excitement of meets and special games and fireworks to come in the evening, the Junior Activities chairmen had just thrown up their hands, and the brats ran wild.

A freckle-faced girl of ten with stringy red hair, one of the McDermott brood, darted screaming between Al's stilts, almost upsetting him. From the loudspeaker came strangled noises. Some other brat, or maybe a dog, had fallen into the water, fouling up one of the races.

Right on the sacrosanct Mall, reserved for the meditations and cocktails of the elders, half a dozen eight-year-old boys were playing tag among the round little tables shaded by blue and white beach umbrellas.

From their dour expressions, Al knew that the older members sitting there were already drafting heated protests to the House Chairman. Well, it was Kiddies' Day.

The Irish Catholic crowd (naturally) had first come up with the idea that the children deserved a day of their own and, in their strenuously patriotic fashion, hit upon the Fourth. Even the strong Yankee element which had very

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little use for children at the Club any day of the season had to bow before the pressure of flag and home.

As an ambitious Club politician who some day could make Commodore if he played the Groups right, Al had gone along with the idea from the beginning. The tennis crowd was already sore at him, and he simply couldn't afford to alienate the Irish Catholics, too.

That was why Al stood eight feet tall in an Uncle Sam costume today, handing down flags and little red-white-and-blue favors to the children, precariously trying to pat little heads and generally feeling like a horse's ass. But in Club politics as in national politics, he realized resignedly, the young fellow on the make first has to play the horse's ass one way or another to prove that he's a regular guy.

As indicated by its ornately ugly porte-cochere, Housatonic Yacht and Tennis enjoyed an aristocratic past, and back when Al's Dad had sat on the Board of Directors, such a naked, undignified pitch for popularity would almost have merited expulsion.

In those genteel days, Club nominations and successions had been arranged by gentlemen in the smoke-filled privacy of the board room and never, *never* through consultation with the membership at large. Electioneering was—well, what those Tammany fellows in New York did.

But today the porte-cochere was an anachronism, and there had even been talk among the newer members that Buildings and Grounds ought to have it torn down. The true symbol of Housatonic's lowered status—barely upper middle class and barely holding its own, guardedly democratic and getting more so all the time—was the modernized dining room with its shiny tubular furniture and the ostentatious picture windows that looked onto the harbor.

Ironically, the very *nouveaux* who deplored the porte-cochere were delighted with the new dining room because it was new. Thus, in their opinion, uncluttered by taste or tradition, the gleaming claptrap enhanced Housatonic's status, when it did precisely the opposite.

As second-generation Housatonic, Al was instinctively Old

Club with a feel for the comfortably shabby, for the same old familiar furniture, rugs, and faded prints of clipper ships in the same old familiar places.

And, as Chairman of the Admissions Committee, he tried to keep Housatonic as Old Club as possible by prudent selection of new members. It wasn't easy, and like every other son of privilege in today's strange, pushy world, he sighed for the good old days his father had known.

When yachtsmen had ruled the Club, the tennis courts were primarily to placate the non-sailing wives, and there had been no other Groups to appease. Admissions was a salty committee which showed up three or four times a year in their blues and Club ties to ponder two questions.

Is he a gentleman? How big is his boat?

It had been generally known, and accepted without resentment in the City of Housatonic, that no others need apply, so the deliberations had been short and simple, leaving the rest of the evening for serious drinking.

But now!

The unthinkable had happened. The yachtsmen no longer were in the majority. In fact, like the pale Protestant faces seen flittingly along the sidewalks of New York, they had become picturesquely rare. Instead, the Groups were fighting among themselves to capture the prestige of Club control and bigger budgets for their own activities.

Even Al, shrewd Club politician that he tried to be, found the power struggle confusing. On any issue, the Groups merged unpredictably into each other.

Once, simply because the two leaders were personal friends, the tennis crowd had thrown its weight behind the drinkers. There was a proposal to up the bar rates 10 per cent across the board, and the drinkers were sick and tired, they said, of being expected to make up the Club deficit single-handed every year. Al had privately conceded they had an argument, but the issue had been settled on muscle, rather than the justice of it, and he resented that.

Another time, the family membership crowd and swimming group worked out a mutual assistance deal. The swimmers

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wanted to get the small fry out of the big pool where they were a damned nuisance. With the support of the family votes, the swimmers forced the Club to build a wading pool, a \$3,000 luxury which Housatonic really couldn't afford.

As Admissions Chairman, Al also had one of the votes on the Board of Directors, and as Housatonic yawed, without true course or purpose, he tried on each new controversy to vote honestly, but also practically. For the sake of Club harmony, he genuinely wanted each Group to be happy if that could be achieved without bankrupting Housatonic. He also had Babcock & Son, the family insurance business, to think about. He'd made a little money out of his Club contacts in new policies and he'd kept old ones from straying.

Maybe it wasn't as important as he tried to make it look when he claimed a lot of the chits as deductible business expenses on the April Gethsemane each year. But certainly he could lose a lot of business if he tried to block the wrong candidate for membership or frustrate the wrong Group.

Finally, and he honestly couldn't tell himself how much it figured in his calculations, there was the hag that had been on his back so long.

He *did* want desperately to become Commodore, he *did* want to damn old Uncle Ben's eyes, and even though Ben was long since dead, it would be a profound satisfaction to top him at last. With all his vindictive scheming, Ben had never been able to make higher than Rear Commodore.

"Hey you, up there!"

Al started, and almost lost his balance.

Everything about Pat McDermott was big or loud: his voice, his muscles, his shock of red hair, his fighting Irish face with its ruddy, traffic cop's complexion, his expensive madras jacket that clashed dreadfully with his blue and white striped Club tie and his flaming hair.

With some justification from their point of view, the Yankees dismissed him as "that big loud Irish contractor," a social offense which Pat seriously compounded in their eyes by also being wealthy.



Somehow, they felt that, through inheritance, they should monopolize the local wealth and a fellow who could make it all in a generation must have engineered some pretty tricky political contracts. That was it, political contracts. Their own dollars had long since been purified of their original sweat and perhaps Indian blood by immersion in trust funds and slum properties on the wrong side of Housatonic.

Al liked Pat. His heart was as big as everything else about him, and even if he didn't have the smooth, quiet polish that Housatonic preferred, you always knew where he stood.

There was a disarming simplicity in his total insensitivity to the petty status symbols that nagged most of Housatonic's members. To Pat, status meant only a big, happy family, and a man blessed with four children was more fortunately placed in this world than a man with three cars.

Having six children himself, he needed nothing more to brag about, and he liked to talk about his big plans for them. The girls one day would go to a very elegant boarding school run by French nuns, and Patrick, Jr., would maybe make the team at Notre Dame. Of course, when that day came, his wife would insist on Georgetown for young Pat, and after a few years under the genteel French nuns, the girls would come home feeling a little apologetic for their father's crudeness and perhaps, in the end, success would leave Pat confused and wondering.

But right now, the only Irish Catholic on the Board, an honor he rather naively prized because he hadn't sought it, he was riding the crest of what the sociologists call upward mobility. Additionally, on the prodding of Commodore Emeritus Peabottom, the sage of Housatonic, Al had appointed him to Admissions.

"We had to give them a representative on the Board," the Commodore Emeritus had said heavily. "And there'll be talk if we don't put him on Admissions, especially if we have to block some impossible Irishman. But, frankly, I don't like it. They may take us over yet."

Then he had given Al a gentle reminder about his own status.

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"Oh, I haven't forgotten your grandmother, Al. But that's different, and long ago. You're one of *us*. They're so damned clannish!"

"Maybe, sir," Al had suggested diffidently, "that's because of the standoffish way that the Protestants treat the Irish. You know, even at the dances, there's very little table hopping or cutting in with them."

Peabottom had merely unfurled his huge silk handkerchief and blown his nose resoundingly. This was the old-fashioned gentleman's way of indicating that the subject was not worthy of further discussion.

"Al, I've got a message—or a warning."

Pat tried without noticeable success to lower his booming voice discreetly. "Peabottom's looking for you. I think he's on the warpath on that Dreyer business. Good luck!"

"Thanks, Pat. He can't miss me on these damned stilts. I'll have to face up to him."

"Kiddies' Day!" Pat said expansively. "Aren't our kids lucky? When I was their age, I got maybe seventy-five cents to buy firecrackers. That is, if the old man was working. Look at all these kids have! The beach, the pool, the tennis courts."

"Ostensibly, Kiddies' Day, Pat. You're a grown man and know the facts of life. Actually, by the tribal rites of Housatonic, the Fourth of July is the high point of our fertility season."

Pat relished a profane or vulgar joke, but talk about sex made him uncomfortable.

"Aw, Al, don't let's gossip."

"For example, there is a lady, no names of course, who, having shed her last husband, is our chased high priestess today, if you will forgive the pun."

Pat squirmed. He never could quite understand Al and his perverse sense of humor. Sometimes Al would flare up in such a forthright way that Pat would nod admiringly and say to himself, Why, he's one of our kind. Then, other times, like now, deliberately needling him when he knew it was embarrassing, Al was just a damned Wasp, which was

the political shorthand in Pat's Democratic district club for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

That was how the Irish Catholic Group generally reacted to Al. They liked him with baffled reservations. He's not entirely one of them—yet he's not one of us, either. Al knew how they felt, and sometimes, though it wasn't good Club politics, he had just enough Irish in him to bait them.

"In spite of your maidenly blushes, Pat, you know perfectly well what I'm talking about. Husbands whose wives—like mine—are in the country are heavily pursuing our priestess of the day. And wives whose husbands are in Chicago on business resent the interfering hussy when they themselves are available."

"Al, you've got a dirty mind. That's all there is to it. I'll see you later and buy you a drink—if you'll talk about something decent!"

Al laughed. Ordinarily, he didn't think it sporting to kid a man on his sensitive point, and there was more to be said for, than against, Pat McDermott's prudishness. I guess this damned Dreyer business is making me irritable, he decided.

In its marvelously unpredictable manner, the whole split Club, all the Groups, the tennis gang, the swimmers, the drinkers, the Protestants, the Irish, even the vanishing yachtsmen and the commuters who usually were too tired evenings to muck in Club politics, had begun taking sides over the couple.

Al had the uneasy feeling that he was being pushed squarely into the middle and, with him, his Club career.

Unless he could figure a graceful out with honor, his future would go down the drain over that pestiferous case and maybe with it a good part of the insurance business, too. Whichever way he turned, he was going to offend a lot of the Right People in the City of Housatonic.

Then there was what Jean had said that Sally Morgan, the town's social gauleiter, had said about what the Right Women were saying about the Dreyers. Usually, when Jean

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reported social alarms and excursions in complicated sentences like that, Al listened with close husbandly inattention.

Jean was always getting herself in a social stew, and though he understood the private hag riding her back, he found it increasingly difficult to be sympathetic.

Trouble was that while she had grown up in Housatonic, her parents had been newcomers in town. Her mother, just as grimly determined as Jean, had been tentatively accepted when the family went broke in the depression. Old families could go broke in those days. In fact, Al remembered, it was the fashionable thing to do. But people like Jean's parents, who had risen on their money, suddenly didn't have the one thing that made them acceptable.

In the glacial social movement of a small city, the family had thereafter remained in the limbo of the almost-accepted, and Jean still felt the sting. Until the last of the Old Guard died off, she would be something of a newcomer. Thus, among the Sallys and even the faintly *déclassée* like Margie, Jean suffered a vague disquietude, a lingering sense of social insecurity.

For a year now, she had been conducting intricate feminine maneuvers that he couldn't possibly follow to make sure their daughter, Liz, got an invitation to the Summer Cotillion.

Why daughters had to come out in the first place, at great expense and personal inconvenience to the fathers, who had to learn a lot of archaic, damn-fool cotillion steps, Al couldn't possibly understand, either. But there it was, one of those inscrutable mysteries of the sex that man can neither solve nor ignore.

Now, with the invitation list about to be released, overdue in fact, somebody knowing Jean's weakness had dispatched Sally with a very pointed message. Liz's social future, it seemed, hinged on Al's decision in the Dreyer case.

Of course, Sally hadn't phrased it so bluntly. In one breath, she had plugged the Dreyers and, in the next, without a period between the two subjects, had told Jean that Liz was *so* young that the Committee would *almost*

have to overlook the rules to accept her, and, at seventeen, a girl's heart shouldn't be *broken* because, after all, there *might* be a place for her on next year's list.

It was blackmail! The hell with it! Supposing Liz didn't come out. He, a Babcock, had to worry about status? Jean thought so. Enough to threaten their very marriage if he didn't come through the right way.

To emphasize her point, she had taken Liz and Dick with her to her mother's present home upstate and she wasn't coming back until he made up his mind. Physically, Al missed her. Marital love, as Kinsey had found, was ecstasy tamed and regularly scheduled.

A hell of a way to think about your wife, but that was the way he thought about her now, after twenty years of marriage, and he wondered if they were heading toward a crackup.

"Ahoj there!"

Oh God, Nick Carnes, the Ancient Mariner, the professional sailor of Admissions, the hearty old salt of Housatonic, and its most crashing bore, too.

"Al, I just saw the most distressing, disgusting spectacle in the harbor! I tell you, unless the Marine Committee does something, I'm going to bring it up before the full Board."

Nick's wispy brown mustache was bristling with outrage.

"One of the stinkpots give you a heavy wash?"

"Worse! Those Jensens, the people with that flashy forty-foot inboard, you know, *were feeding garbage to the seagulls!*"

"No! But seagulls have to live, too, Nick."

"*Not in the harbor.* You were a sailor once. You know the mess they make!"

"Tell it to Marine. Admissions has its own problems."

"Oh, I almost forgot."

"I know. Peabottom's looking for me. Pat told me."

"Has Pat changed his mind on the Dreyers?"

"I didn't ask him, Nick. He's been wavering. But if you push an Irishman, he just pushes back. I might push him right into your camp for good, and I don't want to do that."

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"Al, I am sorry that I can't go along with you. But you know how I feel about boating members and, well, there it is."

"Forget it, Nick. But don't forget what I said before. It's just possible I will have something in a day or two that will open your eyes about Dreyer, boating man or not."

Nick shrugged noncommittally. He was a bit of an ass, femininely petulant and indecisive about most things, but in his self-appointed task of trying to make Housatonic a yacht club again, he could be impossibly stubborn.

From over by the tennis courts, Al saw Jon Winston fastidiously picking his way through the children toward him. Al waddled forward to meet him.

Jonathan Winston III, Wasp of the Wasps, High Episcopalian, third-generation Housatonic, looked cool, but a little out of place in a sports club, in his Italian-tailored summer business suit. And he was a little out of place.

Most of Housatonic's directors were motivated by a hunger for prestige or power, but Jon accepted his Club responsibility in an annoying spirit of *noblesse oblige*, the way he dutifully accepted the various inherited civic and charitable responsibilities of a Winston. In the process, he managed to convey the impression that he was doing the world something of a favor.

As far back as Al could remember, Jon had almost never stood for a round of drinks or signed the dinner chit for the whole table except on occasions when he really had to. This was partly the instinctive parsimony of those whose family wealth has survived the democratic peril of shirtsleeves-to-shirtsleeves in three generations. Jon had the rich man's almost paranoiac fear that people were out to get his money, while his role on earth was to pass on to his son what his own father had left him as intact as those damned confiscatory inheritance taxes would allow.

But, more, in his superb condescension, Jon took it for granted that anyone wining or dining with him was honored in the process, and why shouldn't the fellow pick up the

check? It never occurred to him that many of his inferiors at Housatonic had the audacity to consider him cheap.

"Hi, Al. I must say, you look rather silly up there."

"It's for the kiddies, Jon. I'd do anything for the kiddies."

"I'm sure I know why. And again, I must say, I'm sure neither your father nor my grandfather would quite approve."

Al swallowed the genealogical taunt. In this Dreyer business, Jon was critically important to him.

"That call hasn't come through, Jon? You haven't heard anything?"

"No. And it all sounds so melodramatic and underhanded, somehow. Not quite my dish of tea, really."

"It's for the good of the Club, Jon. Or I wouldn't have asked you to do it."

"And that, I want distinctly recognized, is the only reason I am doing it. Oh, and by the way—"

"I know. He's bearing down on me right now. Our saintly Commodore Emeritus, you mean?"

At times, Al struck Jon as, well, rather too flip. The fellow was basically a gentleman and all that, and they'd known each other all their lives, but still, on occasion, the Irish came through. Al would suddenly sound off or get unexpectedly stubborn. Right now, Jon suspected, he might even be subconsciously enjoying this Dreyer mess that he had dragged Jon into. Much the same as Pat McDermott, but from quite another ethnological point of view, he felt there was something will-o'-the-wisp about Al, and he didn't like it.

"I wouldn't be frivolous, Al. The old boy's pretty exercised over our stalling in Admissions. I'll leave you alone with him to square it as best you can."

Though the sights and sounds and smells of Housatonic were all so familiar, the faces somehow looked different to Al from his added two feet of eminence on stilts. It was like looking into the mirrors in some sophisticated fun house that don't make you totally ridiculous but impart a sly, leering caricature.

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As a young man, old Peabottom must have been ugly-looking. Now age had softened his features, and his deeply furrowed face was imposingly Jovian. Having once been a county judge, he also had that brisk air of command that old judges and retired generals never seem to lose. Al had always been properly respectful to him.

Now, seen from above as he elbowed autocratically through the merrymakers, he was just a duck-shaped little old man. He can hurt me, Al thought, but I'll never be really afraid of him again. He's old and presumably wise, but old men can use very bad judgment and then usually be too stubborn to admit it. That's exactly what has happened in this Dreyer business.

"Al! Al Babcock! Get down off those silly stilts. I want a word with you."

"Yes, sir."

Al gingerly unstrapped the poles. He stepped down out of the stilts and rolled up the trailing pants legs of his Uncle Sam costume.

"Get yourself a drink and come over to that far table on the Mall where we can talk privately."

"May I get you something, sir?"

"Never before dinner, my boy."

When Al had fetched a Scotch, Peabottom opened his attack as slowly and circuitously as his initial approach had been gruffly unsettling. It was courtroom technique, and Al braced himself for the cross-examination.

"By the way, you still keep the Blue Jay, Al?"

You old fraud, you know damned well that I do, and why. Only boating members can make Flag rank, and the Jay is my credential.

"Of course, sir. Jean loves sailing, you know. Unfortunately, I just don't seem to find the time these days, what with business and all the work on Admissions."

"Glad you mentioned Admissions. I wonder if you remember another little talk we had back when you took over as chairman?"



Again, you old fraud, you know damned well that I do. You hinted very heavily that I probably would be nominated this year for Fleet Captain, and your heavy hints, sir, generally come true at Housatonic if the recipient does your bidding.

"I was very flattered, Commodore, at the time."

Al's faint emphasis on "the time" didn't escape Peabottom. He really liked this boy and, for his own sake, Peabottom hoped he wasn't getting uppity.

The hard, shrewd old eyes bored into Al momentarily. Then the lines and wrinkles in his face dissolved into an expression of wintry good fellowship.

"Well, in that light, so to speak, I want to ask you to do me a favor. A small favor."

"Only too delighted, Commodore."

"I want you to report personally to the Executive Committee on the Dreyers."

"Certainly, sir. As you know, Admissions usually meets on the third Friday of the month. So I'm sure we'll be in shape. Executive meets on the last Monday, correct?"

"I don't want to delay that long. There is a special meeting of Executive. Tonight."

Al couldn't altogether conceal his dismay. He had expected pressure from Peabottom, but not this naked exhibition of force.

"Today's the Fourth, sir!"

"Highly irregular, of course. But all of us happened to be here, so we decided on a short meeting to dispose of a few things that, frankly, have been dragging too long."

"On such short notice, I don't quite know what to say, sir."

"Just an informal report of progress will do very nicely. We won't keep you away from Jean and the children more than a few minutes."

"I don't mind on that score, sir. They're all in the country at her mother's home."

"Sorry to hear it, Al. They don't usually go up there this

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time of year, leaving you alone over the holiday. There isn't, well, any special significance to the visit, I trust?"

"None at all, Commodore. Everything's just fine. Jean felt that she needed a rest. And she took Liz and Dick because she didn't want to burden me with baby-sitting chores."

"Very considerate of her. Relieved to hear everything's all right. See too many marital cases on the dockets these days. Now, about tonight."

Peabottom carefully unfurled his big silk handkerchief. He worshipped power achieved nonviolently, which meant by legal and political means, and he was willing to achieve it ethically and benevolently if those intangible virtues did not get in his way.

He felt a benign interest in Al, whose Club career he had furthered, and the boy was useful to him, too, in this awkward period of transition and adjustment to the Irish. In view of Grandmother Kate, Al served as sort of a bridge with those people whom Peabottom personally couldn't stand.

But if the young man were now getting balky, either thick like the Irish side of the family or crafty and overambitious like the Babcocks, his usefulness was destroyed. He would wait and see. First, he would put the matter in a fatherly, Christian manner, and if that didn't work, well, the future would take care of itself.

He blew a resounding bugle call to emphasize the point to come.

"I must confide in you, Al. Aside from my personal interest which you know and, I have every confidence, respect, a good deal of interest has developed in the Dreyers. They have some rather influential friends in Housatonic who are becoming concerned about the delay in Admissions."

He stowed the handkerchief slowly in his pocket as though he were stowing sail. "Don't misunderstand me, Al. I've always said that, in a gentleman's club, Admissions must not be pressured. Ever! But here we have an unusual situa-

tion. We may have to raise dues, and we have the room for several new members whose initiation fees would be most helpful financially at this time. And yet a perfectly charming couple like the Dreyers are held up. People keep asking me *why, Al!*"

"Admissions has not been dilatory, sir."

"I know that, Al. That's what I've told people, that I have every confidence in you, my boy. I know you will be able to clear the air with a report—a satisfactory report. Say about ten o'clock tonight, as soon as the fireworks are over?"

"Yes, Commodore. I'll be there. Thank you for your confidence in me."

Till dinner, Al wandered from Group to Group, politicking by force of habit but wondering desperately, over and over and over again, how he could delay the showdown that had been so suddenly forced upon him.

In the dining room, he managed to get a tiny table by himself, skillfully avoiding Margie. For Al, at the height of Housatonic's fertility season, there could be no midsummer indiscretion with Margie, as there had been last weekend. He felt embarrassed every time he looked at her, and even though he was still angry at Jean, he felt twinges of guilt, too.

No. Tonight, no sex or whisky.

He had to keep his mind on that meeting after the fireworks with the austere five who really ran Housatonic and report—report what?—on the Dreyers. Then the fireworks would really start.

In spite of the name, Dreyer was a Christian and, oh to God, Al thought passionately, that he had been Jewish! No problem then. He just wouldn't have been proposed. Not that he himself was prejudiced, but it would have taken him off the griddle.

Al remembered back, only a few weeks, to Memorial Day when the whole damned mess had started so properly, the way correct members give the first gentle, genteel push to candidates whom they are sponsoring.

MAY
MONDAY
<b>30</b> Memorial Day

Despite the dull and stately ceremonies that never changed from year to year, there was something refreshingly like the pagan rites of spring in the formal opening of Housatonic Yacht and Tennis each Memorial Day.

Such a happy day!

At last the dock-pounding, beach-eroding storms were over, and after its long cold winter's sleep the Club jumped once more with life, color, noise. Little boats that had been sitting disconsolately in garages and the big ones sheltered expensively in boat yards were back in the harbor where they belonged, the strong spring sun dancing off their new, starkly white sails and shiny brightwork.

Warm yet tonic, the breeze fluttered the blue and white beach umbrellas and the blue phlox and white candytuft that repeated Housatonic's colors in the little flower bed at the base of the towering flagpole.

The air itself was the Club's own peculiar perfume of May compounded of hamburgers broiling at the snack bar, fresh paint on the clubhouse blinds, and, near the pool, the overstrong solution of chlorine inevitable at season's opening.

Such an expectant day!

Once again old friends met to plan regattas and weekend rafting rendezvous, swim meets and tennis ladders, and all the other terribly important unimportant things that would

carry them happily through to the season's death on Labor Day.

With unconscious cruelty, they ignored the new members on the fringes waiting to snatch and secure any conversational line tossed in their direction, covertly studying the program and translating bells back into hours in order to follow all the activities.

Every year as long as he could remember, except one May when he had been bedded with the measles, Al Babcock had attended Opening Day. To him, hour by hour, or, more properly, bell by bell, it was all as familiar and boring as the inevitable steps of the waltz.

The briskly nautical ritual of the official opening at eight bells (noon), the buffet beginning at two bells (one o'clock), then the various athletic events all afternoon, cocktails at six bells (seven o'clock), dinner at one bell (eight-thirty), dancing until the little orchestra signed off with *Goodnight Ladies* at two bells (one A.M. Sunday).

And yet, despite its unimaginative three-four time, so bitter-sweet in its evocation of a happy, vanished past! Coming back to Housatonic each season was like coming home again.

To Al's first meeting with Jean before they had even reached their teens . . . to the summers back from prep school and the fumbling indiscretions with the pliable, ever-available Margie . . . to the proud years when he had crewed in important races, once in the Bermuda, and the tender years of early marriage when he and Jean could scarcely afford the modest Corinthian Class dues . . .

And then the more recent years, crowded with Club responsibility and privilege, starting correctly with the dirty job on Junior Activities and working slowly up through Beach and Entertainment to Regatta and, at last, the Board.

And somehow at each step losing another intangible little piece of youth. Usually, in inarticulate nostalgia over all that had been and now was gone forever, Al got tight on Opening Day.

But first, today, as a Director, he had to report to the

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board room at seven bells (eleven-thirty A.M.), wearing yachting cap, blue blazer with the Club patch, white shirt and Club tie, white ducks and white shoes.

There Housatonic's brass greeted the visiting dignitaries from other clubs up and down the coast and the district Coast Guard commander. Then everybody marched solemnly out to the Mall, the directors lining up behind their guests and Housatonic's own three flag officers.

A yacht club could be graded by the number of neighboring commodores who thought its Opening Day important enough to attend. Al could remember when at least a dozen had yearly honored Housatonic. Today, standing rigidly at attention, holding his white cap stiffly to his chest as old Dr. Gaunt of First Methodist, a Navy chaplain back in World War I, delivered the invocation, he counted only five.

It was an unhappy portent, and he tried to dismiss it from his mind.

The erratic microphone played tricks with Dr. Gaunt. Sometimes the tired old voice faded to an unintelligible whisper, then crackled or boomed disconcertingly.

And yet, as the old man with shaking hand read the prayer that had come down from the days of sailing ships, beseeching God's mercy and favoring winds and surcease from storms for Housatonic, Al found the ritual, unchanged from his Dad's day and before that, strangely moving.

*"Almighty God, be pleased to bless and to take into Thy almighty and most gracious protection, we beseech Thee, the officers and members of this Club, the fleet and all who sail therein . . . all those who go down to the sea in ships, and ply their trade in great waters, the guardians of our shores, and all who are in lightships and lighthouses. . . ."*

There was a flutter of paper as the spectators turned over the printed programs. Haltingly, they followed Dr. Gaunt's reading of the psalm and prayer with their responses.

"Oh that men would therefore praise the Lord," Dr. Gaunt intoned, "and declare the wonders that He doeth for the children of men."

"They that go out upon the sea in ships and sail upon the waters," the audience answered.

"He maketh the storms to cease so that the waves thereof are still," the quavering voice said triumphantly.

"He bringeth men safely home again that they may live to serve Him with gladness," the people responded.

Finally, the Commodore officially pronounced the Club in commission for this, its eighty-third season, and the little cannon boomed. The American flag, Housatonic's blue-white pennant and the Commodore's flag raced up the line, and the barren flagpole leaped into gay, breeze-whipped color.

Al wanted to hurl his white cap into the air and yell like a schoolboy. Instead, he smiled and cheered sedately with the onlookers.

Then he quickly picked his way through the crowd back to the clubhouse and the board room where the Club brass were briefly, privately entertaining the visiting commodores.

Mike, Housatonic's florid-faced, white-thatched bartender who occasionally mislaid a weekend himself, was pouring at a makeshift bar set up at one end of the directors' long mahogany conference table.

"Quick, Mike, before they all stampede in. My first Scotch and soda of the season."

"The very words your father used to say, Mr. Babcock. And may it be a good season, God willing, for us all."

Al tossed off the drink.

Mike didn't bother to ask him if he wanted a refill. Silently, he took the empty glass and handed him a second drink already made. Mike knew more about the drinking habits of Housatonic's members than their own wives.

"Hi, Al! Problems yet?"

Joe Amory was a thin, wiry man in his late fifties with the squinting eyes and wind-wrinkled face of an old sailor. In his salad days, he had been the catch of HY&T, but he had managed gracefully to elude the ladies. Now he paid nicely balanced attention to the sea and to Scotch, also

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maintaining an absent-minded, increasingly platonic liaison with a "fiancee" of long standing.

The irregularity, having gone on for so many years, was generally accepted, and Joe would cause talk only if he took steps to legitimize the relationship, but there was little danger of that. As an aging bachelor, Joe just wanted to be comfortable, which meant keeping things as they were, particularly women and the Club.

As Al's predecessor on Admissions, he had labored to preserve HY&T's Old Club atmosphere by prudent selection of new members. Al, he knew, had the same ambition but for a totally different reason, which rather amused Joe. Among the comforts of advancing age, he treasured his freedom from responsibility and worry.

And Al was so damned earnest! He fretted about what HY&T would be like when his kids grew up. This business of handing things of value down the generations, of worrying about a quarter of a century from now, couldn't have concerned Amory less. So long as HY&T lasted out *his* lifetime in its present unchanged shape, he would be satisfied. Without children or close relatives, he really didn't give a damn what happened after he went wherever hard-drinking, slightly immoral bachelors go.

There was another amusing thing about Al. He tried so hard to be the very model of the young Club politician, and yet he had allowed himself to be maneuvered into the hot spot of Admissions Chairman, a hazardous assignment for a fellow with ambitions.

Remembering the sudden summer squalls that could blow up on that committee, Amory wondered whether Al would be deft enough to ride them out. He was glad now that he had changed his mind about resigning as a Director when he gave up Admissions. Al might provide some entertainment at those usually dull monthly meetings of the Board.

"What problems, Joe?"

"Sticky candidates."

"None. We're lucky this year. Only nice people are being put up."



"We need more members, Al. Without a waiting list to hide behind, you might get into an awkward situation."

Al gulped half of his drink and shrugged.

"Take a word of fatherly advice?"

"Of course, Joe."

"The only mistakes my committee made were the ones we let in."

"Sounds like you have reservations about some of Housatonic's members."

"We were standing together out on the Mall. You must have counted the visiting commodores. I tell you, Al, Housatonic is losing prestige."

At the bar end of the long table, there was a crash of broken glass. A morning drinker, already a little tipsy, had upset a tray of drinks.

Amory smiled sadly.

"One of yours, Al?"

"No, goddammit! You must have let him in."

"The hell I did!"

The man turned toward them, and they burst out laughing. It was Tom Andrews, one of Housatonic's oldest members, who was always at least a little drunk.

"Peabottom himself probably was on Admissions when Tom slipped under the porte-cochere," Joe said.

Al giggled. A couple of fast Scotch and sodas on an empty stomach always made him a bit light-headed.

"It really isn't funny, Al. Take a look around the pool, the courts, the Mall. Where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile."

"We do what we can," Al said defensively. "But the old-timers have a nasty habit of dying off. We have to replace them, and the new ones aren't quite as good. Then they bring in *their* friends who couldn't have made it on their own."

Joe nodded. "I know. I'm not blaming you personally. My committee went through the same thing. It's Gresham's Law applied to clubs. And so Housatonic goes—downward.

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Though I don't know why I give a damn so long as it all doesn't go to hell in a handbasket in the next few years."

Nick Carnes was tacking through the crowd of blue coats toward Mike. Spotting Al and Joe, he came about sharply.

"Gentlemen! A lovely ceremony, I thought, and now a nice little breeze is blowing up."

His face broke into a petulant frown. "But, I must say, here we go again, and right on Opening Day! The Grounds Committee *distinctly* warned all parents that children must not bring dogs onto Club property or let them follow them here. I'll wager there were at least ten on the Mall."

As a father, Al had gone through this problem with Liz and Dick, and he was privately convinced this was one fight Grounds could never win. But the complaint struck a responsive chord in Joe Amory. As a bachelor, he simply couldn't understand why parents were so lax in their discipline.

"Did you see that big ugly shepherd sniffing at the microphone right while Dr. Gaunt was delivering the invocation?"

Nick's voice shook in indignation. "Why, that dog isn't even a *member!*"

Under the cover of the mutual canine outrage, Al slipped away. He decided to nurse the rest of his second drink, to pace himself. It was going to be a long windward reach before *Goodnight Ladies*. Holding the glass as a shield against the inevitable *What'll-you-have-Al-I'm-buying-this-round*, he wandered out to the Mall, where the general membership was milling about, to find his family.

Suddenly, a strong, proprietary feminine hand squeezed his bicep, almost making him spill the drink. It was Margie.

Her hair, startlingly blonde thanks to regular rinses, was almost Club white. She wore high-heeled white shoes and carried short white gloves, and her clinging silk dress was dyed exactly Club blue.

But to the men of Housatonic, there were more interesting features about it. It was too tight and too short, high at

the neckline to accent her breasts, breathtakingly low in the back. Al couldn't entirely veil his appreciative glance.

"You like the way I look, Al?"

"Extremely patriotic."

"Is that all you see, the Club colors?"

"I see a good deal of you, Margie, and I like that very much."

"That's better. But all the time I was ill, you didn't even send me a get-well card." She made a coquettishly reproachful face. "And once, Al, things were different between us."

Oh God! If Margie would just sleep with men and *then let them go*, she would be so much happier, and so would the men.

Except for one Club dance right after the war when he'd just come home from the Navy, Al hadn't touched her since their teenage days. But, in her obsessive possessiveness, she had never entirely released him to Jean, any more than she could let any other man tiptoe quietly out of her life.

Within a year after her second marriage, she was occasionally seeing her first husband again, and that contributed to the second crackup. And her third marriage had foundered over a renewed interest in a Housatonic member who had been Al's rival when they were all teenagers. Actually, with men, Margie wasn't so much a wanton as a miser.

"I'm terribly sorry, Margie. I was sure that Jean sent flowers to the hospital."

"I didn't mean Jean's flowers, and you know it, Al Babcock."

Somehow, Margie could make a man feel guilty if he *didn't* have adulterous designs on her. Al shrugged impatiently.

Damn this tough, withdrawn man, Margie thought. I gave you more love, Al Babcock, I taught you more than Jean ever could! She never mattered till that time I was a little silly and eloped from junior college, and you wouldn't allow me one mistake. You had to get married, too, to spite me.

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Jean was right there, the blushing young girl graduate of Housatonic High who never even went to college, with a soft shoulder for you to cry on. She got you on the rebound. That was desertion, Al Babcock! You were supposed to wait for me. If only you had waited . . . The others, none of the others, really have mattered. . . .

There was a smidgen of truth in what she told herself. Only God or Freud could have said exactly how much, but at least part of her wantonness was her constant, hungering search for someone she could care as much for as she did for Al. She had never found him.

So she went from man to man, never satisfied, always seeking, basically frigid. Love was more technique than true, passionate response, a repetitious adventure that intermittently demanded the stimulus of novelty and the excitement of chasing or being chased.

Perhaps marriage to Al would have rescued her from the deep corruption of her soul, but—except that she had to justify herself, blame anyone rather than herself—it was nonsense to blame him for her promiscuity. Even in her teens, she had lusted also for other boys at Housatonic, and he certainly hadn't been responsible for her first elopement.

Anyhow, after all her subsequent experiences, speculation at this late date was idle. What might have been just never could be. By now, Margie was bed-prone.

Suddenly her face brightened, and she patted down her hair. From behind him, Al figured, a man must be bearing down on them. He glanced around and saw Paul Ling, Peabottom's tall, thin, hawk-faced junior partner, with a strange couple in tow.

As a lawyer, Paul was a good business finder for an insurance man like Al, and more than once he had obligingly passed on tips. Al forced himself to keep on friendly terms, but he distrusted the man.

Paul was a cold fish, totally self-centered, almost insultingly taciturn and remote. Except when he wanted something, and then he was aggressively genial. Except when he was a little

drunk at the bar and got to talking passionately about kikes and niggers.

Al considered himself neither a pro nor an anti about Jews and Negroes. Once or twice, in fact, on Admissions, he had put the blocks to some inverted snobs who were arguing that Housatonic should "pioneer socially." Meaning, of course, bring in a Goldberg and a Bunche, and then say, "See what a good tolerant Club are we."

One nice Jew, one *very* carefully chosen Negro in Housatonic might ease the guilt feelings or political embarrassment of some of its members. But they wouldn't do a damn thing toward solving America's race problems, and they sure would raise hell with the peace of mind of the older members.

And he was doubly damned if Housatonic was going to be stampeded into accepting anyone because of his race or religion. Maybe some day, the Club would ponder the awkward problems of a Jewish or Negro candidate who was just too qualified to block *in spite of* his religion or his race.

Personally, Al was in no hurry to reach that day but, nonetheless, despite unrealized prejudices inherited and well fortified by environment, he didn't go along with words like kike and nigger.

"Margie! Al! So nice to see two dear old friends!"

Paul's effusiveness obviously had something to do with the couple with him.

"And may I introduce the Dreyers? Mrs.—" He hesitated momentarily, groping for Margie's most recent married name. "—Winters, I would like to present Helen Dreyer. And her husband, Joe."

Margie nodded coolly to the woman, beamed at Dreyer.

"And, Helen, may I present Al Babcock?"

Paul tried to keep his voice light. Somehow, though, the way most doctors smell a little of antiseptic in spite of their expensive cologne, he couldn't altogether keep the offensive, cross-examination tone out of it.

"Al is old grumbly, who stands at our gate, chasing away the unwanted. Give him your most ravishing smile, Helen."

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Al braced himself for the gush that lady candidates shower shamelessly on Admissions people.

Instead, this small brunette with dark eyes and olive complexion looked at him almost appealingly, and the smile was tentative. There was a strained look in her eyes that made Al instinctively feel sympathetic, though he wondered what the devil he was sympathizing with her about.

He remembered his duty as keeper of the gate. "It is a pleasure, Mrs. Dreyer." His voice was politely noncommittal. "I do hope our little flag-raising and the pious incantations of our Fleet Chaplain didn't unduly bore you. Really, he is the nicest fleet chaplain for miles around."

"Oh, no, Mr. Babcock!"

It wasn't gush. He sensed a real anxiety, an unexpected tension in her soft voice.

"I've always wanted to attend Opening Day at a club. It's such—such a lovely tradition, I think."

Too bad, madam, Al thought, and immediately reproached himself for reacting like an Admissions chairman rather than as a human being. But you shouldn't have said that. Means you've never been around clubs. Maybe there's even an underprivileged girlhood in a New York slum that we will be checking out.

Paul Ling caught the slip. He dropped a few more British Thermal Units into his voice, and it became boiling hot with geniality. "And, Al, this is Joe Dreyer. We went to law school together."

"Al—it's real good to meet a friend of Paul's!"

Goddammit, Al thought, can't I be *mister* at least during the first round of the amenities? He found his hand being pumped like the handle of an old well. He sensed trouble.

Jean thought women had more ESP than men, and Sally, that busybody old bitch who was the self-chosen WAC sergeant-major of the Right Women, softly referred to her own troublemaking as "feminine intuition." But plain ordinary insurance men, if they stand at the gate long enough, cultivate delicate hackles, too.

Joe Dreyer was in his early thirties, already a little florid

and fleshy, the lazy athlete who'd let himself go to seed, maybe with an assist from the bottle. And he was much too self-confident for a guy who must have known that he was being shown strictly on approval.

The venial sins Al and Admissions tolerated. If they didn't, Housatonic would be completely an old crocks' club. The accepted sinners were a little flirtatious, a little loud, a little heavy on the bottle, maybe even a little vulgar. The key word was "little."

But Admissions was scared to death of letting a mortal sinner slip through the elaborate Victorian grillwork gates and up to the porte-cochere. A mortal sinner was a drunk, a deadbeat, a pincher, a pawer, a no-gentleman which Admissions, in various stealthy investigatory ways, sought to prove or to disprove.

Through County National, which held Housatonic's mortgage and thus had a paternal interest in its affairs, Al often double-checked on credit rating and general character. Once, through a Housatonic member who also belonged to a New York club that enjoyed overseas exchange privileges, he had been able to investigate clear to London, England.

That had been the celebrated case of the Englishman being pushed by the tennis crowd, a chap with monocle and impeccable British accent who somehow didn't strike Admissions as being everything he claimed to be. And, as the stiff reply from London, England, made plain, he wasn't.

No gentleman, sir. Not even a quairespectable remittance man, whose aristocracy would have more than compensated at Housatonic for certain weaknesses of character. And though tennis raged, he didn't get into HY&T.

But, now and then, just often enough to keep Admissions worried, a bad one did slip past. Dammit to hell, Al thought bitterly, long before race problems had been dumped on club doorsteps, there had been the human problems that afflict the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant as much as anyone else, and they are still our main problems today.

Unless you have politician members making a whorish grandstand play for votes, or some cross-grained idealists

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who don't give a decent damn about the susceptibilities, justified or not, of their fellow members, you don't expect much trouble from Jews or Negroes. Who's going to stand up and sponsor them?

But a no-good Wasp bucking for membership can pull a lot of the correct strings, like that phony Englishman, and I'm meeting one right now. Dreyer smells wrong.

Again, Paul Ling's quick, courtroom eyes caught the expression on Al's face.

"It's more than just law school, Al. We went to different colleges, but then we found we had belonged to the same fraternity."

I get the message, Paul. *Your* fraternity. So he is a Christian, even though his name is Dreyer and he's a lawyer. But I had already figured that out for myself. Paul Ling would no more have associated with a Jew than Peabottom would have plugged a Catholic for Commodore. Tell me more, Paul.

"Al, I'm particularly happy to tell you, before it is generally known, that Joe is joining Peabottom, Hardy & Ling."

His voice dropped impressively. "And I don't mind saying right in front of him that the old man is very keen about Joe."

Mission accomplished, Paul.

You have passed on the word from our revered Commodore Emeritus, Chairman of the Nominating Committee and old Mr. Housatonic himself, from whom all blessings flow.

Peabottom has now graciously usurped the job of the Admissions Chairman just as he usurps the jobs of the Commodore, the other Flags, and any of the committee chairmen when it fits his purpose. But Peabottom is a gentleman and barrister of the old school. Which means that, so long as he gets his way, everything must be done very legally.

For Admissions, there remains only the chore of seeing that all the constitutional articles and bylaws pertaining to new members are duly obeyed. And, though the decision is



already made, of playing out the comedy of invoking its various safeguards: hollow safeguards in this case.

Al didn't like it. The old man's arrogance was insulting.

"Nice to have met you, Al."

There was the hint of dismissal in Joe Dreyer's voice. He glanced questioningly toward Paul Ling.

Might as well say it out loud, Al thought disgustedly. We've met this guy, now what's the next step in this dull little minuet?

Helen Dreyer extended her hand. Again, the anxious tone, the almost pleading look in her burning dark eyes, but her voice was a bit more confident now. In spite of his cool reserve and seeming self-assurance, there was something sensitive about this man. She liked him, and felt that she could trust him.

"Goodbye, Mr. Babcock. And I did, I really did, enjoy the ceremonies so much."

"Good day, Mrs. Dreyer."

And stop fussing, woman! Don't you realize that you're almost in?

Unnecessarily, Paul Ling shook hands. "We'll see you around later, Al. I want to introduce these nice people to some friends. Margie, why don't you come along with us?"

Quickly, Margie took Dreyer's arm, leaving Paul to follow with Helen.

The letters, of course. As Peabottom always said, the rules must be strictly observed. There must be no exceptions by a key committee like Admissions. And Article V of the Constitution of Housatonic Yacht and Tennis Club said in stately legal prose:

"Any candidate for election to membership must be proposed and seconded by two members in good standing who shall set forth in detail in writing to the Admissions Committee the desirability of said candidate and shall further agree that they will, upon demand, make good any dues or house charges incurred by said candidate for a period of one year after his election. In addition, four other members

in good standing who are well acquainted with the candidate must submit supporting letters."

The way Al privately visualized Housatonic, the Club was a cool, happy little castle of fun and games protected from the outside world by a series of deep moats.

The first of these defenses was the sponsors' enforced assumption of financial responsibility. That kept out the deadbeats. The notorious deadbeats, he amended wryly, thinking of the chronic foulups who were posted every other month.

Second came the letters. If an intruder (Al's Old Club definition of a candidate) was offensive, he could scarcely expect to corral a sponsor, a seconder, and four honest members to write glowingly in his behalf.

Again Al made an amendment. Who more than an Admissions chairman, who reads the same stereotyped phrases of vague praise year after year, should know what a joke supporting letters really are!

A determined dynamiter needed only an enthusiastic sponsor and seconder. Between them, they could twist four more arms, and Al preferred not to think about the leverage that was used. Business threats or promises, political or social obligations, and more than once in the past, he suspected, letters that had paid off more intimate obligations, not to the candidate but to the candidate's wife.

Right now, Paul Ling, who undoubtedly intended to propose the Dreyers, was seconder-hunting. Because of his Club office, Peabottom could not write. But Paul would have no trouble. Any fellow lawyer or client would oblige as a courtesy to the firm.

And there would be no trouble, either, in getting the other four letters (Margie certainly would write one) for this presumptuous young man who thought he could get into a nice club without really trying. Fortunately, there were more moats within the moats.

"Al, where have you been?"

In her expensive, two-piece, salmon-colored knit suit with black accessories, Jean looked cool and unassailably correct

for Opening Day. And, Al guessed, probably attractive to most men.

But her voice, as usual in recent months, was edged with a tired, nagging possessiveness more annoying than Margie's. He sighed resignedly, as she reacted with sharper irritation. "Really, Al, you seem to think this Club is more important than your own family."

"Please, Jean." His tone matched hers. "I was buttonholed for five minutes by Margie and Paul Ling, all of five minutes, and already you're sending the case up to the Supreme Court."

Why were they so quick these days to snap at each other, Jean wondered unhappily. God knows it wasn't her fault; she'd done the best she could to secure the family socially. But he was so impossibly smug; he took status for granted as a Babcock. A Babcock! Someday she'd tell him a thing or two about his family.

Al winked furtively at his daughter Liz, happy but self-conscious in her beige suit left over from Easter and the brown shoes with heels much too high for a seventeen-year-old. In the deplorable way of teenage girls, Liz giggled.

"I'm glad you two find something humorous," Jean said. "But Dick has been positively *hounding* me for lunch."

"Aw gee, Mom," Dick protested. He felt important, as only a ten-year-old can, in his blue blazer with the Club patch, his white ducks and white bucks. "I only said I wanted a hamburger and Pepsi *before* lunch."

Jean ignored him. In her relations with the children, as in her social relations with friends and more intimate bed relations with Al, she was increasingly unpredictable. She knew it, but she couldn't seem to control herself.

After all she'd done, the plebeian shadow of Al's Irish grandmother, long dead, still frustrated her social ambitions. God, how she hated that biddy! She felt like telling him right now.

Al saw the storm clouds gathering, and hastily tried to placate her.

"You look a little tired, dear. I'll find our table."

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"Of course I'm tired! And I have one of those headaches."

The self-pity nettled Al, because the truth was that Jean would never admit the simple fact that she might be suffering from a hangover.

"I'm so tired of being sick! If it didn't mean giving up everything, I think I'd become a Christian Scientist."

Al couldn't resist the opening. "You could become a Christian Scientist just mornings, my dear, and then you wouldn't have to give up your afternoon cocktails."

"That's very funny, I must say. I'm sure Liz will be convulsed."

Well, this could continue by the hour, he thought.

"Let's get our table. Near the flagpole, I think. And I must say your Garden Club certainly did a wonderful job with that blue and white stuff carrying out the Club colors."

"The Phlox divaricata and the candytuft, you mean."

"I don't know what you call them. But in plain English, they cost the Club quite a bit."

"That's all you think of! The Club and money. Of course, planted perennials are expensive. But I had to help plant them; you didn't."

From a waiter passing with a tray, Al got a drink for Jean and himself. With one more under his belt, for the sake of the kids, the Babcocks would somehow get through luncheon without more friction.

"Here's our table. Dick, you're a man now. Hold the chair for your sister the way I'm holding Mother's chair for her."

Though she complained that the Opening Day luncheon menu offered no choices, Jean ate all her fried chicken, salad, and a piece of apple pie, and seemed in better spirits afterward. Al told the kids to go get lost with their friends.

With Jean, he wandered aimlessly, talking to friends, watching a bit of the tennis and swim meets, holding himself down to two more drinks because she was matching him. At five, they picked up Liz and Dick, took them home and, after an hour's catnap in separate beds, showered and changed for the evening.

*I will not wander, I will not wander,* Al promised himself,

and during the cocktails, dinner, and the dancing afterward, he was never away from Jean more than five minutes at a time.

It didn't satisfy her. She would come up to the bar to call him to heel. But then, when they were back together at their table, she looked past him at the dancers, saying almost nothing.

Long before *Goodnight Ladies*, at eleven-thirty P.M. she complained again of a headache. He was glad of the excuse to leave, though it was the first Opening Day in years that he hadn't gotten tight. He didn't know whether to blame Jean for it or that Dreyer business that unaccountably nagged at the back of his mind.

### ► Chapter Three

JUNE
TUESDAY
14

In the hot little second-floor board room, decorated with the browning photographs of scowling, mustached commodores long dead and gone, the big, dented brass clock, a relic from an old sailing ship, chimed one bell.

At the head of the long conference table, Will Archer, Peabottom's ineffectual, hand-picked Commodore, gaveled for order.

Properly, Will should have been flanked on his right by the Vice, on his left by the Rear, but both Flags had been relegated further down the table. In their places, Peabottom

held the seat of honor on Will's right, while the Secretary was directly across the table from him on Will's left.

In this position of vantage, Peabottom prompted the Commodore and occasionally instructed the Secretary in hoarse whispers what to put in or omit from the minutes. No doubt about it, the old man pulled all the strings.

In first-come, first-seated order, the rest of the directors were scattered down the table on both sides, all of them very nautically correct in blue blazers and Club ties. Except young Jack Lyons, the tennis whip.

A racquet in his lap—imagine that in the old days at a board meeting!—Jack was still in his whites, having reluctantly left the courts at the Commodore's insistence. He kept swabbing his sweaty face and neck with a handkerchief.

"Mr. Lyons," the Commodore said. "The rule, you know."

"Sorry, Commodore. I didn't have time to change."

Jack extracted a crumpled dollar bill from the pocket of his shorts and tossed it to the Secretary. Any director who appeared at a meeting without the Club tie was fined one dollar, the money going into the directors' private drinking fund for a party after the Board's final meeting of the year.

"Mr. Commodore."

When he remembered it, Peabottom went through the hollow ritual of asking to be recognized by the chair.

"Yes, Mr. Commodore Emeritus."

"In view of the Director's attire, which is otherwise somewhat casual, I suggest that an additional assessment be levied."

"You are quite right, sir. Another dollar, please, Mr. Lyons."

Like a chastened schoolboy, Jack reluctantly rummaged through his pocket and came up with another dollar bill.

"Thank you, Mr. Lyons. You are contributing quite generously this season to our little fund, it seems. Now I will ask the Secretary to read the minutes of the May meeting."

"I believe we can dispense with the reading," Peabottom interjected impatiently. "I so move."

"Second," Nick Carnes said promptly.

Like ham and eggs, a second from Nick was part of any

motion by Peabottom. Up and down the table came a dutiful ripple of Ayes.

"So moved," pronounced Archer. His voice was authoritative. Whenever an issue had been incontrovertibly settled, Will was fiercely authoritative. "Does the Treasurer have a report?"

Ted McDonald, the local CPA who handled Housatonic's financial affairs, fretfully rustled a formidable sheaf of yellow working papers.

"As I have repeatedly told this Board, I cannot present a complete, detailed report so early in the month. If board meetings were properly held later, I would have the figures from the cashier's office."

For the sake of efficiency, the younger directors had often argued for the change. But like most cross-grained, venerable institutions, Housatonic clung stubbornly to the poorer hand-me-downs from its past, though many of its gracious inheritances had vanished.

"Second Tuesday has always been Board night," Peabottom said heavily. "Club policy."

No real reason. Just Club policy.

Admissions didn't interview candidates until the third Friday of the month, which meant that eligibles could not be voted on by the Board till the following month. And Peabottom's Executive Committee, through which important Club business funneled, didn't meet until the fourth Monday.

To save time, the younger men had argued, all committees should meet earlier in the month and clear decks for full reports to the Board. But under the sacred cloak of "Club policy" Peabottom had managed to keep the calendar unchanged. Thus, on any awkward matter, a simple motion to refer it to Executive effectively pigeonholed the controversy for at least a month. And since Admissions met after the Board but ahead of Executive, Peabottom's committee could review the accepted candidates before they came up before the full Board.

Yes, Peabottom not only pulled the strings, but the old par-

liamentary shyster was always in the strategic place at the right time to pull them.

"Any other committee reports?" Will Archer asked.

With the Club open only two weeks, none of the chairmen had yet exceeded their budgets, and all were very brave in predicting a highly successful—yet economical—season for their particular activities.

"For tennis, sir," Jack Lyons said, "I would like to say that the new all-weather court is working out splendidly. I realize that when the money was voted, there was some opposition among the directors."

He glanced sharply toward Al Babcock. To Jack, Al was always so damned stubborn about anything new, whether it was the enlightened modern way to deal with minorities or just a tennis court. He'd tried to set him straight because basically Al meant well, but the fellow was impossible to argue with.

"However, as I predicted, the ladies are giving the new court a very heavy play weekdays, and the men book it up solid on the weekends. Unless we have a lot of rain, I predict the fees will go a long way, just this season, toward paying off the debt."

Al listened with skeptical reservations. Jack bumbled enthusiastically over anything new like a small kid with a birthday present. Personally, Al had fought the new court, and he still felt that such a heavy outlay for just one of the Groups was unjustified.

The payoff would come at the October meeting when all the bills—and deficits—were finally totted up. Ted McDonald had the same thought.

"We always talk this way in June," he said crossly. "But may I remind the various committee chairmen—as I try to do every year, though with strikingly little success—that budgets are made to be lived within. Otherwise, Housatonic will be in worse financial shape than we're already in. And that's bad enough!"

"I can report some good news," Peabottom rumbled. "I



talked to Joe Delancey at County National. The bank, though a bit reluctantly, will extend our loan another five years."

"Good!" exclaimed Will Archer. Then his face clouded. "But my recollection is, sir, that the bank requires a cosigner. And—well—I'm Commodore, and fifty thousand is a bit steep for my personal signature."

Peabottom's tone was fatherly. "Not a cosigner, Will. By law, the bank must have a guarantor."

"Is there any distinction?"

"As some of you may know from unhappy experience a lending institution can go after the cosigner as soon as there is a default. But County National can't go after a guarantor till the defaulter—the Club, in this instance—has paid off as much as possible. The guarantor then makes up the difference."

"On a fifty-thousand-dollar loan there could be quite a difference."

"There's another possibility, Will. A hold-harmless clause executed by the Board in behalf of the membership, holding you harmless, releasing you, so to speak, from single responsibility in case of total disaster to the Club."

"In all fairness to Commodore Archer, sir," Ted McDonald cut in, "I think we ought to tell him one thing. If he signs, he is assuming a contingent liability that might reflect on his own credit status."

"A contingent liability," Peabottom rebutted, "which is offset by a contingent asset, so to speak. The Club property. But I would prefer to thrash this out in Executive, if you don't mind."

He leaned to his left to whisper into the ear of the worried Archer.

"Oh, yes, I'd forgotten," the Commodore said. "Do we have a report from Admissions?"

"No report, Commodore," Al said.

Peabottom frowned.

"I believe, Al, that we are not up to our full quota of members?"

"Correct, sir. For obvious reasons, I would rather not have

this go beyond the Board and get all over town. But, unfortunately, we no longer have any waiting list."

"Exactly how many openings are there?" Peabottom pressed.

"Four, sir, to bring us up to full quota."

"Right now, as Ted McDonald has made plain, we need all the dues and initiation fees we can lay hands on. Does Admissions propose to do anything about the situation?"

"We expect to meet several candidates at our next meeting, Commodore Peabottom."

"May I make a suggestion, Al? A suggestion, purely."

"Certainly, sir."

"We will adjourn this meeting at four bells at the latest. Could you caucus immediately thereafter with your committee and brief them on the couples who are to appear?"

Al had intended to do exactly that, and he had all the applications and supporting letters with him. But he now decided to make it seem that he was obediently following the old man's suggestion. He wasn't quite sure what Peabottom was up to.

"I'm sure we can, sir." He glanced questioningly at his committee. Under Housatonic's prudent constitution, only directors could serve on Admissions, and all of them were present. They nodded in agreement.

Peabottom beamed.

"Fine! Fine! Now a second suggestion, gentlemen. On the hopeful assumption that Admissions finds the candidates acceptable at the interviews this Friday night, we could call special meetings of Executive and the full Board early next week to approve them."

There were puzzled expressions up and down the table, and he added smoothly, "I'm thinking, of course, of getting in money as quickly as possible."

Which just wasn't the truth, Al knew. Housatonic's financial plight wasn't that drastic. The Club could withstand the customary month's delay in accepting two or three candidates and receiving their initiation fees. No, Peabottom's sudden

steamroller tactics must have some other motivation, not the good of Housatonic.

The only thing Al could think of was his personal involvement in the Dreyer case, and Al resented it. He resented Peabottom's devious approach and the old man's arrogance in assuming that Admissions and the whole damned Board, for that matter, would do cartwheels for him and his pet candidate.

"I'm afraid that would be quite impossible, sir," he said firmly. "The candidates have not yet been posted the full period. The constitution specifically states that the Board cannot vote them in until their names have remained posted for ten days."

"I recall that we have accepted candidates ahead of that period, contingent on receiving no objections from the membership in the next ten days."

"Perhaps, sir, before I served on the Board. But I was given specific instructions that Admissions must make no exceptions."

Peabottom's face darkened into a wrinkled thundercloud. He wasn't accustomed to any challenge to his authority, and he struggled to control himself.

Unlike most of Housatonic's members, the old man ignored petty displays of status. In its elaborate seagoing heraldry, the Club had even a prized special stripe to denote Commodore Emeritus. Peabottom had never bothered to have it sewn on the well-rubbed sleeve of his Club jacket.

It wasn't that he was totally insensitive to such little niceties. He scorned them. With his legal brain, he stuck unerringly to the *corpus delicti*, the necessary fundamental facts, the heart of the matter. With power, such trappings as an extra stripe on a sleeve were redundant; without power, they were empty pretense.

And Peabottom concentrated ruthlessly on acquiring and maintaining power, which necessitated total loyalty and obedience from his minions on the Board. Now, he wondered, was Al Babcock getting out of hand?

For the moment, however, he restrained himself.

► Tuesday, June 14

"If that's all you can do," he said curtly, "it's all you can do. But I assume that you will caucus tonight."

Al nodded, thinking to himself that the old autocrat had almost added, "And that's an order!"

As Peabottom had predicted, the meeting broke up before ten. Al's committee stayed behind as the others filed out deferentially behind Peabottom, then made quickly for the Cellar.

"Whew!" Pat McDermott exhaled loudly. "What was the old gentleman so all-fired excited about, Al?"

"Not to give you a short answer, you'll see when we go over the files."

One by one, Al studied his committee, wondering how many of them would really come through for him under pressure. While he had selected them himself, he had diplomatically followed Peabottom's advice that all the Groups be represented. The result was a very curious amalgam as nicely weighted as a political ticket.

Besides Pat McDermott, "the delegate from Dublin," as Peabottom always called him, there were Jon Winston, representing the Wasps, and Jack Lyons, the delegate from Forest Hills, of course.

The heavyset fellow was Ed Abernathy, who represented "the country club element," as the drinkers were politely termed. They didn't give a damn about getting a wet backside in a boat or a scorched face on the courts, but their dinner tabs and fat bar chips helped keep Housatonic precariously solvent.

Finally, at the end of the table—*O temporal O mores!*—Nick Carnes, the only blue-water man on the committee. Admissions was a microcosm of Housatonic's nonintegrated Groups, all with their separate and conflicting definitions of a proper Club.

Under pressure, Al thought, each would react differently, and the reaction could maybe be guessed by their different standards, realistic or superficial. In this era of packaging, when the container often costs more than the contents, Al doggedly held to a basic distinction. There were authentic

things of value like power, wealth, inherited position, possibly even culture or talent, and there were status symbols which were merely the containers for these things of value.

Henry Silliman, the immensely wealthy department store owner, kept three cars, and his full garage was an authentic, effortless status reflection of his affluence. On the other hand, there were many more Housatonic members who also boasted three cars, all of which they were buying on installment. The kindest thing you could say was that their values were mixed up. Al couldn't say that. He called them phonies.

Pat McDermott was relatively uncomplicated. He loved the Irish and small children and wanted as many as possible of both of them in a big, noisy Hibernian Housatonic. They satisfied Pat both as things of value and as status symbols. So far as Al could anticipate, nothing about the Dreyers should excite Pat's quick and formidable sympathies, and any of Peabottom's sly pressures would only get his back up. One on my side, Al decided tentatively.

Though much more finicky than Pat, Nick Carnes also was a man of simple motivation in whom the thing and the symbol were genuinely intertwined. He wanted an old-fashioned yacht club with old-fashioned yachting members. If the Dreyers owned up to the slightest interest in the water, Nick would be for them. He was Peabottom's man, too. At least for the time being, Al couldn't count on his support.

He had no qualms about Ed Abernathy, deceptively vulgar on the surface, who pretended to think of Housatonic primarily as a private bottle club. He was blunt and profane but totally honest and with an unexpected sensitivity. Few of his fellow Club members knew it, but Ed had stood in the upper tenth of his class at Harvard, majoring improbably in the classics.

Having gone there from a small, democratic Connecticut high school, he found himself first puzzled, then hurt, and finally disgusted by the broad-A elegants from the very English, tea-and-chapel boarding schools of New England. Remembering their frosty superiority, he now mocked all status symbols, but you can't send a boy to Harvard without having

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some of it stick, and deep down, Al knew, Ed respected tradition and the authentic things of value.

Naturally, he didn't trust Jack Lyons. Like Nick with his boat, Jack primarily wanted a correct and comfortable place to hang his racquet. Unfortunately, he also ran with Housatonic's small, annoying clique of rich young liberals who had either inherited or married wealth and felt fashionably guilty about their accidental good fortune.

Whereas Ed derided ordinary status symbols because they were affectation, this crowd deplored them as dreadfully bourgeois and merely substituted a more fashionable set of their own which emphasized a pretended love for all the minorities. It was this sub-Group, in its involuted snobbery, that had been pushing for Jewish members.

Not because any of them had close Jewish friends or entertained Jews in their own homes, which reasons Al would have respected. But because they somehow thought they could thus assuage and parade both their guilt feelings and their superiority.

Jon Winston, thank God, was an understandable snob of the old school. He had the fear of the more realistic privileged of being overwhelmed by the sweaty masses, compounded in his particular case by a weak man's gnawing sense of insecurity. He held his precarious perch atop the rock by legacy rather than by achievement, and if he were ever pushed off he couldn't make it back up again on his own. With his heritage of place, he was status secure, and in clothes, cars, manner of living, he felt no need for ostentation. His status symbols were petty, private, almost reflecting family worship, designed to reassure him rather than to impress the world, and so all the little badges of Housatonic, trivial as they were, seemed so terribly important to him.

Jon was unnecessarily proud of his low seniority number, 22, which merely indicated that he was the twenty-second oldest living member of Housatonic in uninterrupted years of membership. (Any number below 100 was respectable; Al's was 89, and that satisfied him.)

Jon carried only Club matchbooks, always wore a tie

clip decorated with the Club burgee, and practiced a form of status-within-status worship that was totally lost on all the newer members, Numbers 100 and higher: his Club tie was slightly frayed. Not because Jon was a careless dresser. No, it was because the more recent batches of ties were a *slightly* different shade of blue and to Jon, the old, paler tie was the proper tie of *his* status.

Silly, of course, but somehow, probably because Jon's symbols were not the vulgar show of the pushers, the climbers, Al sympathized.

His own father had taken on cholerically when the newfangled dial telephone first came into use, robbing the Babcocks of their fine old family number, Barnum 30. After all, some status marks can be frivolous, even comic, and yet be genuine testaments to tradition or achievement. He thought of such extreme examples as the platter lips that make kissing a Ubangi lady such a challenge and of the merit badges flaunted by fat-bottomed little Boy Scouts.

With Jon, the correct ploy would be an appeal to his frightened snob instincts, but Al had to go slowly. This fastidious, overbred man could react unpredictably, as weak men often do. Like any fragile object, he required special handling.

*Et tu, Babcock?*

Al tried to analyze his own private, private feelings about clubs and what he wanted from Housatonic in particular. Club membership, he decided, was the gregarious manifestation of every man's drive to prove himself, to be accepted, to belong.

As a boy, he and his friends had built a tree shanty that they called their clubhouse. Nobody from the other side of town was admitted. In prep school, at college, he had bucked for the correct and exclusive societies and, admittedly, as with Jon, there was a thread of snobbery in him that reached all the way back to the jerry-built little shack in the tree.

But there was a much richer, warmer emotion involved, too. To Al, his Club was a refuge where time stood still,

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where you were *known*, where everything was reassuringly familiar, even the insufferable bores. Housatonic was just part of him.

"Well, let's get going, Al," Jon said impatiently.

Jon's voice startled him, and Al looked up to see the other directors eying him curiously. He'd have to watch himself. Recently he'd fallen into the habit of lapsing into reveries. Maybe it was the intermittent trouble with Jean.

"Sorry, gentlemen. I was wool-gathering for the moment."

He placed three folders on the table. "These are the candidates whom we meet, with their wives, on Friday evening. Let's go through them in case any question develops."

He cleared his throat, and glanced toward Ed Abernathy.

"First, gentlemen, Dr. McDonald is proposing a candidate."

Abernathy groaned. "Old Doc Stethoscope! Another doctor, I bet. And all six letters come from doctor members. Right, Al?"

Al nodded.

"Why don't doctors ever have any supporting letters from patients?" Ed asked.

Jack Lyons scanned the application. "A surgeon, too. For all we know, the man may be a homicidal maniac."

Al rapped a pencil on the table.

"Ed, Jack! Please! The application and letters are all in order. And we've never had anything but excellent candidates from Dr. McDonald. Be fair now."

"He's proposed about everybody in the county medical society," Pat McDermott put in mischievously. "How come he never got around to Doc Weiss? Best obstetrician in Housatonic. With six kids, I ought to know."

"Please, Pat!" Jon said.

"Look, gentlemen," Al interrupted. "We can be funny all evening or we can get this meeting over with. Unless there is a valid objection, I will ask Dr. McDonald to present his friends for an interview at eight bells Friday evening."



To Abernathy, telling time by bells was one of the more annoying status affectations of the yachting crowd.

"Translate that, please, Al."

"For the benefit of landlubbers, eight o'clock. And, by the way, if Dr. McDonald happens to have any emergency calls, Ted will do the honors in his father's place. Theoretically, as Treasurer and a director, he shouldn't present candidates to us, but I can't see any harm in a case like this."

"Of course not," Jon said pompously. "A mere technicality. We should encourage more doctor members. After all, gentlemen, you never see them posted. They pay their bills."

"By making it almost impossible for the patients to pay theirs," Ed growled. "But put him down, Al. Might as well have the whole medical society on our membership list. Who's next?"

"Frankly, I don't like it. It's from that new fellow who's taking over the McNarty used-car lot. Comes from Iowa, Nebraska, some place like that."

In the schizophrenic eastern way, Al was an internationalist in world affairs, but domestically an isolationist. He was always startled, and a bit suspicious, too, to meet people who actually had been born west of the Mississippi, in outlandish places like Iowa or Nebraska.

"Sponsor, a real estate man who no doubt sold him his home. Seconder, a banker, which tells us where he does his business. Right?"

"And the letters?" Jack Lyons asked.

"One from an insurance man and—"

"A little sore that you lost the business?" Nick Carnes asked.

"Of course not! I'd have disqualified myself on this committee. And I wouldn't have written even a supporting letter."

"Nobody on Admissions can write a letter," Pat observed.

"Right! But I wouldn't have done it anyhow. I don't believe in mixing Club work with business."

Well, that wasn't altogether true, but at least Al did have too much self-respect to do it so baldly.

► Tuesday, June 14

"Now, the other letters. From our local garage tycoon. Another business contact? Then one from another banker. Same bank, though. And from Tom Andrews."

Ed Abernathy shook his head. "Always the sixth man! When you need just one more, go to good old obliging Tom. One of my gang, too. Trouble with Tom is that he just stands at the bar and signs anything, thinking it's another chit."

Jon Winston raised his eyebrows. "The application says the candidate's wife is D.A.R. Do you have anything that you haven't told us, Al?"

"No. I just don't like this cut-and-dried business sponsorship."

"I respect your feelings. But in this instance I do think you are being somewhat finicky."

"I don't quite read you, Jon."

"That happens to be my bank. Those chaps wouldn't dream of putting up an undesirable. And the insurance man, forgive me, is a fellow I eat with every week at Rotary."

Rotary was a cut above Al's luncheon club, Exchange. "Everything's in order," he said resignedly. "Unless somebody wants to back me up, I'll put the used-car gentleman and lady down for one bell."

Abernathy scowled.

"Sorry, Ed. Eight-thirty. Is that your wish?"

He looked around hopefully. Nick Carnes was a little shamefaced; Jack Lyons scowled. But nobody said anything.

"O.K., one bell—I mean, eight-thirty it is. And now the tough one. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Dreyer."

"What do you mean, tough?" Jon interrupted. "Pea-bottom himself happened to mention Dreyer to me."

"I don't know what I mean. Call it a hunch."

"The name bother you, Al?" Nick asked.

"No."

"You mean you've had a little sneak preview?"

"Yes. In fact, I thought the whole Club did, back on Opening Day."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know, I tell you! I just know I've been on this committee long enough to have fairly sensitive hackles. Cheeky sort of bastard, for one thing."

There was a reproving note in Jon's voice. "You are finicky tonight! Peabottom has accepted him into his own firm. Don't you suppose he checked him out? Isn't the Commodore Emeritus' judgment good enough?"

Al was silent. If he said No, it was mutiny. If he said Yes, he was yellow. Very simple.

"Jon, I guess I didn't express myself very well," he said, carefully picking his words. "I'm certainly not prejudging the Dreyers. Last thing in my mind is to question the Commodore Emeritus' judgment."

There!

If you can genuflect verbally, I've done it, he thought. Commodore Emeritus, I kneel and bow my head!

"All I want is a little free committee discussion that won't go beyond these four walls."

Jon relaxed. "Fair enough. While the other chaps are looking over the letters, let me see the application, will you?"

There was silence as the committee read. Al nervously twiddled his pencil.

He was, he prided himself, a no-nonsense, unimaginative businessman, and he'd never been able to finish one of those nameless-dread modern novels where frightened little men run up dark alleys, not knowing what they're running from.

But now he felt it. A vague sense of impending disaster that somehow was connected with the Dreyers.

"Fine letters." Jack Lyons handed the papers back to Al. "Couldn't ask for better, in my opinion. Played on his college tennis team, too. We could use a fellow like that."

If the athletes were for him, Ed Abernathy was instinctively against him. "Pretty vague letters, I'd say. And if he's such a charm boy, how come he didn't charm Al?"

"Look, fellows. I'm sorry I said anything. This is a committee, and you all vote."

In his annoying way, Jon made a pronouncement rather

than an observation. "A very impressive application, gentlemen. Very impressive. Choate, Yale, Harvard Law. And, I am happy to say, another Episcopalian for Housatonic. Ha, ha."

"Ha, ha," Pat McDermott dutifully echoed.

The Episcopalian-Catholic discussion between the two was the tedious running joke of Admissions.

"Just one thing." Jon glanced suspiciously toward Al. "The wife's maiden name. Helen Lang. Lang . . . Lang . . . I don't think I've ever met any Langs socially. Is there something you wanted to tell us, or merely indicate, Al?"

"No. I think Mrs. Dreyer is a very charming lady. Honestly. No reservations about her."

In spite of himself, there was a faint emphasis on the *her*, but Jon didn't catch it. "Then, contingent on the interview, of course, in view of the close association with our Commodore Emeritus, I move for tentative approval of the Dreyers."

"I'll go along," Jack Lyons seconded. "Wonder if he's kept up his game."

"We can't buy a pig in a poke," Abernathy objected. "We'll just meet them. Period."

McDermott emphatically nodded agreement. "I buy that all the way! Al said he wouldn't prejudge. So are we supposed to let old Peabottom judge for us? With all due respect to His Eminence, nuts!"

Al looked toward Nick Carnes. Nick looked back and just shrugged.

"I'm open—empty—minded, Al. I guess I'll go with the majority. Why *don't* we occasionally get boatmen, though?"

Jon's voice was quiet, but there was almost a whisper of a threat in it. "Nick's finally struck his burgee, thank God. How do you go, Al?"

"Just where I went when this silly merry-go-round started. I said I wouldn't prejudge or try to influence you fellows. So we see the Dreyers at two bells."

"Don't tell me," Abernathy cut in quickly. "Let me guess.

The used-car people are set for eight-thirty, so the Dreyers must be at nine."

"I knew a bright chap like you would eventually get it, Ed. And I'm sure, after the interview, it will be all over but the shouting."

In the pig's great big fat posterior, Al added grimly to himself. That was for public consumption, in case Jon or Nick leaked back committee discussion to Peabottom. Truth was there were moats and moats beyond the interview, and he prided himself on being an expert on Housatonic's defenses.

"Thank you, gentlemen. If any of you care to report at the bar at seven bells Friday evening, I'll stand the tab for the pre-interview lubrications."

Abernathy slapped his palm on the table. "First, eight bells, and then one bell, two bells, and now seven bells! In plain English, what the hell time is that?"

"Seven-thirty, Ed. Or, of course, it could be eleven-thirty or three-thirty, for that matter."

"No wonder so many ships sink. Damned fools can't even tell time like normal people."

## ► *Chapter Four*

JUNE
FRIDAY
17

In a nondescript, brown-shingled way, Housatonic was a Victorian anticipation of the split level, which now gives such an aggressively jigsaw effect to the sedate Connecticut landscape.

► *Friday, June 17*

The small, two-story clubhouse was built into a bluff that rose sharply from the Sound, so that the second-floor rear was only a few steps above the sandy soil and scrabbly grass. The first floor front, consisting of the dining porch and the open verandah with its old-fashioned rocking chairs, looked out almost flush onto the water.

Midway on the left side, where the ground sloped down, was the porte-cochere and the little entrance with two half-flights of stairs inside. One led up to the second floor where the lockers and sail loft were located; the other, down to the dining level.

In the genteel Victorian tradition, the founders had tucked the windowless, dark-paneled little bar and grill in the extreme rear of the first floor, well underground and out of sight.

This was the Cellar, dankly cool, gloomy, and to Al, completely charming. It was off limits to the children and even to Corinthians (members aged eighteen to twenty-three). As a club, Housatonic held firmly to the comfortable, old-fashioned illusion that young people didn't drink, though, individually and privately, all parents of its teenagers knew otherwise.

And, happily, most of the women preferred to sip Daiquiris or Parakeets—the latter a pastel conversation piece reeking of licorice that consisted of Pernod, anisette, and crème de menthe—at the little beach tables under the blue-and-white striped umbrellas.

So the Cellar was usually as quiet and restful, and sometimes as boisterous, as clubs used to be before they committed the irreparable mistake of letting the women and kids in.

Al was five minutes late Friday evening, and the other five committeemen were already ordering when he walked into the Cellar.

"Mike, hand me that chit, please. Club rules, committee chairmen pay the damages. What will it be, Ed?"

"Mike's already making mine. A bourbon on the rocks."

"Nick?"

"The usual, thanks. Scotch and water."

"Jon?"

"I don't know. I've never been able to convince a house chairman that a good cellar stocks good wines. Oh, a Dubonnet, I guess."

"Pat?"

"A bottle of cold beer will do very nicely, Al."

"I know yours, Jack. Scotch and soda. Make that two, will you, Mike?"

While Mike was quickly pouring the drinks in the seemingly leisurely manner of an expert club bartender, the conversation went by fits and starts.

Al had often wondered about this masculine ritual. Men meeting to thrash out a problem just can't tackle it head-on, but first must stall a while over a drink, with aimless small talk. He glanced at his watch.

"I'm not trying to ride light, fellows. But it's almost eight bells, and Dr. McDonald will be waiting with his candidates. Drink up. I'll buy after the meeting."

Abernathy tossed down his bourbon and coughed. "A glass of water, please, Mike. Who is it again that old Doc Stethoscope is proposing?"

"A Dr. Carmichael. Then there are the Johnstones, the used-car couple, and of course, the Dreyers. You fellows go to the board room and I'll round up the hopefuls."

The interview was usually the payoff. Until Admissions actually saw the candidate, the committee had nothing to go on except papers and pressure. The facts, the alleged facts, in the application told a lot, but after all they had been supplied by the candidate himself. The supporting letters came from his friends and from members who owed his friends something, and the nonmember references were a boss and usually a bank and a preacher.

Certainly nobody who would come out with the truth and say, Watch this guy, he's nasty after three martinis! Or, Guard your sixteen-year-old girls if you let this lecher in.

Of course, an interview wasn't everything. Naturally, the couples were on their painful best behavior, but it was sur-

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prising how much they sometimes let slip during half an hour's chitchat with the committee.

At the very least, from dress, speech, manners, you could tell if the husband was just a successful diamond in the rough (Housatonic preferred semiprecious gems or even paste so long as they were polished), the wife too flashy or forward for the shaky decorum that Housatonic's gate-watchers strove to preserve.

Or, as Jack Lyons crudely put it, count the heads, divide by one, and if the answer is more than two, there's definitely something wrong with the couple.

Dr. McDonald introduced the Carmichaels with the graceful, windy flourishes of an old gentleman who had learned his manners before World War I. Then, as he usually did when he found new and respectful ears, Nick Carnes promptly took over most of the talking.

Nick was the only committeeman who turned out for the interviews in his brass-buttoned Club blazer and white ducks. Much as Al respected Club tradition, he had to admit that Nick looked plain silly sitting there, his yachting cap ostentatiously parked on the little coffee table in front of him. Sailing, anyone?

But letting Nick ramble on served several purposes. Anyway, it was a little difficult to stop him from talking. And he did make an impressive, if somewhat misleading, façade for the Club as he reminisced about the glorious old sailing days.

More important, under Nick's conversational barrage, the other committeemen could discreetly assess the couple's poise. They allowed for the natural nervousness any animal feels when it is being walked around a ring, but people who were overeager, too respectful, too timid, too pushy were status chasers.

It wasn't altogether snobbishness on Admissions' part. At least they wouldn't have admitted it. So many people chased status these days that you couldn't uncritically accept the little productions the candidates put on for the committee.

*What would they really be like once they got in?*



That was the basic question that always nagged the committeemen, and Al kept firmly in mind the prudent advice his predecessor, Joe Amory, had given him on Opening Day. "The only mistakes my committee made—were the ones we let in."

The interview with the Carmichaels went off surprisingly well. She was the Junior League type: young, rangy, tweedy, assured in an inoffensive way, attractive but not sexy. He was the trim, cool professional man with the alert, authoritative manner of a man who daily makes hard, sometimes cruel decisions. Yet there was a reassuring, human twinkle in those seemingly frosty pale blue eyes.

Nick Carnes finally rounded the Horn in a windjammer and stopped for breath.

"You are a surgeon, Dr. Carmichael?" Jack Lyons asked quickly.

"A neurosurgeon, Mr. Lyons. And that, strangely or not, has led me to consider a new field. Psychiatry."

"Dr. Steth—Dr. McDonald is our Fleet Surgeon," Ed Abernathy said. "Maybe we need a Fleet Psychiatrist, too."

Dr. Carmichael's face was grave, but the eyes twinkled.

"It would be presumptuous on the part of a candidate to tell Admissions, of all committees, whether Housatonic has psychiatric problems, Mr. Abernathy."

Nicely put, Doctor, Al said to himself. You'll do.

"Guess I asked for that," Ed conceded. "Your scalpel is very sharp, Doctor."

"Why psychiatry?" Jack Lyons asked. Several of his best friends were in analysis.

"I think, sir, that knowledge and control of the emotions are the great challenges today. Just look at the state the world is in! I particularly remember one case that had a lot to do with shaping my decision."

Like any laymen, the committee members leaned forward to hear a doctor talking off the record.

"My patient was a nice young Jewish boy in his late twenties."

Even in prejudice, there are manners and status to be per-

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ceived in the way the thing is phrased. The casual, unconcerned tone of Dr. Carmichael indicated breeding. He seemed to be saying, We all know that there are Jews in the world, and we don't particularly like them, but they can't intrude into our tight, safe little world, so why get excited?

The worst kind of prejudice, probably, the last that would fall some distant day before the blandishments of the National Conference of Christians and Jews and the sanctified strong-arming of all the antidiscrimination commissions.

"I had to operate. The operation was a success."

"But the patient died?" Abernathy interjected.

Al winced. But Dr. Carmichael did not fluster easily.

"Oddly, no, Mr. Abernathy. But he didn't get well, either. It was the hospital psychiatric social worker who found the answer to that."

Even Abernathy couldn't conceal his curiosity.

"It was his wife. She was a Christian. She had suffered from the prejudices not only of her Christian friends but also of her husband's Jewish friends. Especially their wives. They resented the fact that a good catch had chosen a *goy*, as they say, in preference to a nice Jewish girl."

"What happened?" Abernathy asked.

"She became promiscuous—but only with Jewish men."

The talk about sex embarrassed Pat McDermott, especially in front of a lady, but he couldn't resist joining the conversation.

"I didn't realize that women—women of this type, that is—were so selective."

"No doubt you have strong moral reservations about her, Mr. McDermott. But subconsciously, you see, she wanted revenge on her husband and particularly on the wives of his friends. And she used a classic feminine technique to obtain it. Naturally, her husband was heartbroken, and his distress held up his physical recovery. Perhaps he didn't even want to get well and go home to such a situation."

"I think Father Doherty could have straightened *her* out in a hurry!" Pat said.

"Possibly." Dr. Carmichael was tactful. "But she wasn't a Catholic, you see."

"And then?" Abernathy asked in a considerably more chastened tone.

"In medicine, there are so many half-finished cases! A psychiatrist tried to reconcile them, to get them to see the truth, and they moved to the Far West to try all over again. And that's all I'll probably ever know about them."

"I hate mixed marriages!" Mrs. Carmichael exclaimed. "They start, like any marriage, with love, and it's terrible, terrible to think that prejudice from without can destroy them."

Dr. McDonald had an old gentleman's distaste for psychiatry and problems of race or religion. He stirred uneasily. "Well, Dr. and Mrs. Carmichael, unless the committee has some questions, I have to get back to the hospital. I'll drop you off."

"Any questions would be purely Freudian," Al said. "We do appreciate, Mrs. Carmichael, Dr. Carmichael, that you could come this evening. Dr. McDonald, thank you."

When they left, the committee caucused with a quick exchange of glances.

"No problems there," said Ed Abernathy.

Which was surprising. Ed had been violently anti-doctor ever since he had been warned to cut down on his drinking.

There was a note almost of surprise in his voice. "You know, a real nice guy! Sense of humor, too."

"It's a vulgar word around here, I know," Pat McDermott put in wistfully. "But she has it. *Class*. I just hope my five daughters grow up like that. And I certainly agree with her about mixed marriages!"

"And your boy. Don't you want him to be another doctor like the nice Protestant Dr. Carmichael?" Jon was heavily resuscitating the running joke of Admissions, and Pat was always ready to oblige.

"Listen, you High Episcopalians have almost come over to us. But you still don't know all the facts of Catholic life.

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Any idea what parochial school costs? For six kids? I'll be lucky to get them through high school."

Al stood up. This Catholic-Episcopalian dialogue wore him down, especially in view of his own church background. He remembered practically the only religious advice he had ever received from his father, a somewhat absentee member of the First Congregational Church of Housatonic. "Son," the old man had told him, "make up your own mind about religion. Be a Catholic like your mother or a Protestant like me—but don't be an Episcopalian."

"I'll bring in the used-car couple," he said to the committee. "Johnstone, with an 'e' at the end, though I don't know why that's important. Ed Condon, who, I assume, has just deposited his commission for selling them their home, will do the honors."

Unexpectedly, the interview went off tolerably well, though Condon had neglected one of the first duties of the conscientious sponsor. That was to coach his hopefuls in advance on the crotchets of the individual committeemen. A pleasantries about tennis, an appreciative remark about the Cellar were the correct gambits for Jack Lyons and Ed Abernathy. A little homey talk about the children deeply affected Pat's big sentimental Irish heart. And when Nick Carnes raised anchor for his conversational sail across the Sound and back, the candidates should murmur dutifully—even though they didn't give a damn about sailing—that they certainly were thinking of buying a boat, and could they come to him for advice?

Al didn't know exactly what his own weakness was. Probably the word that Pat had used. *Class*. If he himself possessed it, securely, unassailably, would he be so sensitive to it in other people? He wondered.

The Johnstones didn't have it. She was a mousy little woman who didn't know how to dress to play down her wide maternal hips. He was one of those capable sergeants of the business world, the subexecutive type whose status was made plain by the pen-and-pencil set in the breast pocket of his jacket.

They both looked blank, almost stricken, when Nick

whistled up the wind. In answer to Jack's inevitable allusion to tennis, Mr. Johnstone allowed that most of his free time was taken up by Little League baseball.

"We aren't much for athletics or social affairs," Mrs. Johnstone explained. "Mostly, our life centers around the children."

"How many?" Pat McDermott asked.

"Four. And *just* at the age when they need playmates." Naïvely, she chattered on. "Matter of fact, we hadn't *dreamed* of joining a *club* till Mr. Condon showed us the house."

Al shot a withering glance at Condon.

"Then he pointed out how close it was to this club and how nice the Club would be for the children, and very kindly offered to see about a membership for us."

Condon had the decency to look embarrassed.

"Well, what I meant, Al, was that here was a real pleasant couple, the kind the Club is always looking for and, well, you know I have the Club's best interest at heart. I know we need members. . . ."

His voice trailed off.

Damn your greedy soul, Al said to himself. First, you make the Club part of a tie-in sale with a house, and now you blab that we have openings. Every noncommercial club has a "waiting list." Why, if a smallpox epidemic carried off half of his membership, any true Admissions chairman would die babbling that the lists were closed, and his last words would be, *Sorry Mr. Carpenter Don't know if or when an opening may develop.*

Now some fool on the Board must have leaked to Condon, of all people, what Al had reported at the last meeting about openings for a few new members. And Condon, like the good Commodore Emeritus, was prepared to take over Admissions' job.

Yet, in spite of their sponsor, in spite of their hickishness—yes, that was the word for the Johnstones—there was something disarmingly appealing in their innocence. Al's prejudices were firm against people from places like Iowa or

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Nebraska, but, with the Johnstones, he thought maybe he could make an exception.

This time, the postinterview caucus was an exchange of raised eyebrows.

"We'll talk afterwards," Al said. "Let me fetch the Dreyers from the dining room."

But Paul Ling was already sitting with them on a couch right outside the board room. He jumped up to shake hands with Al.

"Al, you remember the Dreyers, of course. Helen and Joe."

"Certainly. Hi. Won't you come in and meet the committee?"

Paul ushered them inside, then pumped the hand of each committee member in turn. I hope a writ of foreclosure doesn't fall out of his pocket, Al thought sourly, and spoil this illusion of warm good fellowship.

"Al, may I present the Dreyers to the committee?"

Al nodded.

Paul called out not only the names, but also with an apparent casualness that didn't fool Al, the little identificatory detail that would cue the Dreyers. This couple *had* been well coached in advance. Peabottom would have seen to that.

Helen Dreyer sat almost on the edge of her chair. Her deep dark eyes fastened on Al, as though she sensed his sympathy and was clinging to him as her one friend among so many frightening strangers. Dammit, woman, relax! She didn't strike him as basically a timid woman, and he didn't understand her nervousness.

Her husband lounged carelessly on a sofa, almost in a sprawling position, legs crossed, one arm stretched along the top.

Apparently, the Dreyers had been of two minds about the importance of a meeting with Admissions. Helen wore a red-and-white-flowered backless summer dress with a pearl necklace. She was perilously close to being overdressed, in fact. Joe was very casually Ivy League in a madras jacket, shorts, and high black socks.

Before Nick Carnes could hoist sail, Jack Lyons started the small talk.

"You were on the Fifty-one Yale tennis team," he said respectfully. "Play much these days?"

"Haven't played in years."

Joe Dreyer's face was flushed; he had undoubtedly had a few before dinner, but he wasn't drunk. Since Paul had surely briefed him ahead of time, this was pure arrogance.

"We have five courts," Jack persisted hopefully. "One is all-weather." He cast a reproachful glance at Al. "You should have heard some of the pinch-penny directors when the Tennis Committee first proposed it! But we won."

Joe didn't deign to make a conversational sally. "Sort of lost interest in the game myself."

Jack gave up.

Helen's small voice broke the moment of strained silence, enunciating like an amateur actress reciting a memorized line. "We are thinking of buying a boat."

Nick Carnes leaned forward happily. "Say, that's bully! This Club needs *sailors*, I always say."

Then his voice took on a note of concern. "Not a stinkpot, I hope? You ought to start with a Blue Jay, or maybe something even bigger if you could handle it."

Joe was polite, but still annoyingly casual. "I crewed a couple of summers, way back when I was in prep school. That's the last I had to do with the water. And Helen here is one hundred per cent landlubber."

Nick refused to be dismayed. "Fine, fine, fine! Start small, but by the end of the season, we'll have you wanting a forty-footer. It gets in the blood, I always say."

Neither Ed Abernathy nor Winston had said anything. Jon, Al noticed with some amusement, was carefully appraising Helen. Her maiden name of Lang apparently was still bothering him.

Al didn't have any questions of his own, but he wanted to prolong the interview to expose Joe's un-charm as long as possible. But Paul Ling anticipated him.

"Al, I hate to say this. But if there isn't anything more,

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could we be excused? Peabottom is having a few friends over tonight, and he especially asked me to bring Helen and Joe. You know, the old boy has been pretty lonely since his wife died."

"I'm sure he has," Al answered drily. He doubted whether Peabottom had ever really been lonely except when his old partner and fellow schemer, Hardy, had died.

"Mrs. Dreyer, Mr. Dreyer, thank you for dropping in."

"Thank you, Mr. Babcock."

Helen shook hands warmly.

"So long, Al," Joe Dreyer said. "Nice meeting you, gentlemen. Hope to see you again. Real soon."

Paul Ling escorted them to the door, then darted back to shake hands again all around.

"I know you liked them, fellows. Can you push this one a little fast? I'm not pressuring, don't misunderstand! But they do hope to get in long before the season ends."

He winked heavily. "Joe's the kind of fellow who does a lot of entertaining, too. Good for the house budget. We need the money. Right?"

He left.

"Now where have I ever heard that before?" rumbled Abernathy. "In the three years I've been on this committee, we've accepted at least twenty Diamond Jim Bradys. Only trouble, I never see them in the dining room or the Cellar."

He made a mock-apologetic bow to Jack Lyons. "They just clutter up the courts—no offense to you personally, Jack—or use the Club as a summer babysitter."

"The Dreyers have no children, remember," Jack said. "It's an odd thing, but I think you'll find that our tennis crowd doesn't overburden the Club with children."

Ed was unimpressed.

"Probably waste their energies on the courts instead of the way God intended young men to waste them. Anyhow, I just don't like that guy."

"Old board rooms have leaky ears," Al said.

"We can continue this down in the Cellar. Nobody will be there now, I hope."



The bar and grill was deserted, and, so that Mike couldn't overhear, the committee took their drinks to a corner table at the far end, well out of earshot.

"Let's review them in the order of appearance," Al said. "The Carmichaels?"

Ed Abernathy stirred the ice in his bourbon with his finger.

"Like I said before, Al, no problems there. Right, august fellow committeemen?"

Everybody nodded.

"The Johnstones?"

There were resigned shrugs, then silence.

"They seem to have a nice family," Pat McDermott put in defensively. "And, the good Lord knows, we always need Junior Chairmen of this-and-that. And there's nothing *specific* against them. I vote for their acceptance."

Jon's voice was petulant. "But, Pat, they're *nobodies*."

Jon always could say the wrong thing to an Irishman.

"They're civilized human beings! Maybe not elegant like you, but human beings with kids. And how many non-nobodies does Housatonic have, anyhow?"

"You're right there. We've been going downhill for a long time."

"You mean since the Irish got in?"

Al interrupted quickly. "Pat! Jon!"

"No, Al, let me answer Pat. I don't mean that at all. I mean that we have too many nothings, irrespective of race, religion, national origin, or any of the other chips that people carry on their shoulders. Like the Johnstones, for example."

"Well, why in hell start your upgrading with these poor people?"

Al slammed his drink noisily on the table.

"Will somebody, anybody, let the goddam chairman of this committee say something! Pat, you're right. I think Jon's being unnecessarily narrow in this case. But, Jon, you're right, too. This certainly isn't the Club that your

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grandfather helped found, that my father joined more than half a century ago."

From their puzzled expressions, Al knew that he was falling between two stools, as he so often did in these clashes between the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon.

"Sounds like you're drawing up an indictment of Admissions, Al," Abernathy said.

"Oh, we'll be blamed, all right. But unfairly. Today, there are more clubs, and more members, in this country than ever before. But all that does is to spread the nice people thinner."

Jack Lyons finished his Scotch and signaled Mike to make another round.

"You sound defeatist, Al. And I always figured you were a pretty stubborn guy, too stubborn maybe, in keeping this rather tired old Club definitely Old Club. Now, in effect, aren't you saying that we should flesh out our cadre of nice people with slobs?"

"Not slobs, Jack. But prestige people like the Carmichaels don't walk in every third Friday of the month. So I'm willing to settle, when we must, for nobodies."

Pat got back into the argument. "I'm never quite sure about you, Al, but this time we're on the same side of the tracks. Here are nice inoffensive nobodies who won't give House a hard time because we don't stock Chablis Ninety-nine or whatever, like Jon here."

Jon started to say something, but Pat put up his huge hand.

"Let me finish. This Club needs Indians as well as big chiefs! They'll pay their house charges. Part of their initiation fee will be earmarked for that damned all-weather court of yours, Jack. And maybe, I still say, they can be suckered into committee work. They look like the earnest kind."

Nick Carnes's voice squeaked in its outrage. "You go along with that, Al? You'd put up a fight for a couple like that?"

"Not a fight. But I'm willing to vote for them. Any other remarks?"

Jon seemed lost in thought. "It was not Chablis," he said

absently. "I'm really a very simple man in my tastes. I'll settle for sherry, a nice Duff Gordon, and I don't even ask for Harvey's Bristol Cream, you will kindly observe."

He shot Al an exasperated glance.

"I must agree with Pat on one thing. I'm never quite sure which way you're going. But maybe you and Pat are right on these people. With these damned Democratic taxes, we couldn't support Housatonic without the nobodies. I withdraw my objection."

Al shrugged. "No one else want the floor? Unless I hear the contrary, I take it Admissions will recommend the Johnstones, along with the Carmichaels, to the Executive Committee. Amen."

He took a deep breath. "And now to the Dreyers."

Immediately, his five committeemen were all talking at once, subsiding as Mike came over to pass out the tray of fresh drinks.

With the incorrigible nosiness of Club help, he lingered as long as he could, emptying ash trays, straightening chairs at the nearby tables, trying to remain within earshot.

Mike had practically come with the Club; he was spoiled, and all Admissions could do was patiently to wait him out.

"Anything more, gentlemen?" he asked.

"We'll call you," Al said firmly. "This is a committee meeting."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Babcock. I didn't know."

Which you certainly did, you old fraud. But nosy help are interested help, and how often do you find that today? Al smiled and waved him away.

When Mike had shuffled back to the bar, Al took a crumpled sheet of memo paper from his pocket.

"I made some notes on how each of you felt about the Dreyers when we originally reviewed their application and letters. Let me go around the circle, and everybody else kindly shut up until his turn comes. Jon, you were very much for them."

"Still am." His voice was troubled. "I'll concede that I'm

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not quite so enthusiastic. Nonetheless, Choate, Yale, Harvard Law. Definitely what we need. And old Peabottom, of course."

"Jack?"

Lyons smiled sheepishly. "Guess I went off half-cocked the first time."

He glanced toward Jon. "But I'm willing to admit it. Frankly, with all proper obeisance toward Choate, Yale, Harvard, and Peabottom—I'm just Brooks and Cornell myself—he's a horse's ass. Not Peabottom. Dreyer, I mean."

"Ed, you expressed yourself up in the board room. A No vote, I take it?"

"Dammit, Al, I've been thinking it over again. I'm not sure. She's real nice. Put me down for undecided as of now."

"Pat?"

"I'm sympathetic, too. On account of her. I don't think the sins of the husband should be visited on the wife. Poor woman."

"Nick, I don't have to ask you. You were open, or as you said yourself, empty-minded. But that hint that maybe they'd buy a boat took you in. Frankly, you're an awful sucker for anyone who says that."

"Now, Al, I don't want to go over this all over again, but Housatonic was founded as a sailing club, and it breaks my heart when we put to sea in a bunch of dinghies and four stinkpots and almost never win a cup any more. And our Juniors, I tell you—"

"All right, Nick. All right! Take it up with the Executive Committee. It's up to them to get a real sailing program started."

Al looked at his notes and laughed.

"Except for Jon, you have all more or less reversed yourselves. This committee must be some kind of a nut."

"That means three Yesses," Jon interjected quickly. "Nick, Pat, and myself. One undecided, Ed, and only one negative, Jack. If you go along, Al, that makes four of us."

He looked questioningly at Ed. "I think Ed would go along, too."

Ed shrugged noncommittally. He probably would string along with me, Al thought.

Now Jon's voice was almost pleading, and Al figured that, behind scenes, Peabottom had really put on the pressure. "Don't you see, you're Mr. *It*, Al. You can make it five to one!" He turned to Jack Lyons. "And, Jack, if Al comes over and if I *promise* that this fellow will show a little decent interest in tennis, you won't really hold out, will you?"

Jack scowled. Dreyer's dismissal of The Game rankled, but Jon knew instinctively, as one snob, how to deal with another.

"Come, Jack. Conscientious objectors are *so* tedious! You're much too sophisticated for that."

Unlike poker players, Al thought disgustedly, tennis players never learn to control their faces. On the courts, they smile, laugh, scowl, register horror or indignation at a controversial call by a linesman. Big, jumping, athletic children!

Now Jack's face plainly showed that, under sufficient pressure, he would go along.

"Well, Al?"

Again, there was the whisper of a threat in Jon's voice.

"Well, what?"

"How do you vote? Are you going to be stubborn?"

"I don't vote."

"Dammit, Al, you're impossible!"

"I don't think so. I've been trying to check out Dreyer's nonmember references and previous clubs. That stately old pile on Vanderbilt Avenue alongside Grand Central where the Old Blues sing *Boola Boola*. And a little summer club he used to belong to in New Jersey."

"How many times do we check those out when there is no question!"

"Peabottom himself always says he wants everything according to Hoyle."

"He doesn't mean an Admissions filibuster."

Al felt his temper rising, and fought to control it.

God help the Irish, he thought. Just one Irish grandmother, her hot blood presumably well cooled by all the Yankee ice

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water in his veins, could still give him this much fuel. How do the full-bloods ever restrain themselves?

"Peabottom said he wanted everything according to Hoyle," he repeated stubbornly. "If you cut corners for your friends, and I quote him, you set a precedent that those who are not your friends can use in the future."

What Peabottom had really meant, of course, was that if you control all the mechanics of a club, from Admissions through Executive to full Board, you can generously afford to be punctilious. And if you aren't, you unwisely expose loopholes that those grabbing for control can turn to their advantage.

But Jon was equally stubborn now. "How do you vote?"

"I don't! Whether you like it or not, I'm going to wait for the answers to the inquiries. I would also remind you, as I told Peabottom, that before any action can be taken, a candidate's name must be posted for ten days on the club bulletin board."

"But, Al!" Nick objected plaintively. "As Peabottom said, in the past we have accepted candidates contingent on that waiting period."

"We shouldn't have."

"But you didn't raise any technical objections about the Carmichaels or the Johnstones," Jon said.

"In both cases, as their files show, we have already received letters from their nonmember references and, with the Carmichaels, from their previous club. The Johnstones, as they made quite clear, had no previous club."

"How about the posting so far as they are concerned?" Jon pressed. "Same ten-day waiting period apply?"

"Of course," Al answered wearily. "You know as well as I do that posting is as important to us as announcing the banns of marriage. Any member can speak—privately, to us—or forever thereafter hold his peace."

"Why were you willing to go along in these two cases, but stall on the Dreyers?"

"Because the Carmichaels and Johnstones applied earlier, and their names have already been posted for ten days. And

I'm not being technical, Jon. I would remind you that posting protects the Club in case any member knows something about the candidate that we should know. Just as important to us, posting also protects Admissions from later criticism."

He turned back to the group. "This committee is adjourned until a week from next Tuesday when the ten-day period will be over for the Dreyers.

"Good night, gentlemen!"

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After Al had left for the office, Jean puttered listlessly about the kitchen in housecoat and curlers. She washed the breakfast dishes, then made herself another cup of coffee as an excuse to delay her housekeeping chores. The maid came only Tuesdays through Fridays, so there was the weekend debris of living to be picked up. Somehow, she couldn't seem to get started.

Jean was a small-minded woman with neither talent nor appreciation for music or ballet or art. Intellectually, her horizons were those of Housatonic High where World History stopped at Versailles and American History gave only prudent passing mention to distressing topics like the Scopes trial or Sacco-Vanzetti.

In lip service to things of the mind, she forced herself to read, or at least skim through, Book-of-the-Month's minimum

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yearly requirements, and, as conversational insurance, she mastered one article monthly in *The Reader's Digest*. Almost as though she knew what she was talking about, she denounced communism, Negroes, Jews, Democrats, organized labor, and the emergent African nations.

Despite the passion in her voice, her animadversions were not so much due to prejudice as to fear of the unknown clamorous things that posed a threat of change to her tight little world. But for details of these events swirling outside Housatonic and lapping ever closer, she lacked even a vague, *Time*-sized curiosity.

Most of the wives in her set professed some cultural achievement or, lacking that, enthusiastically attacked national and world problems with all the weaponry of aroused womanhood: emergency meetings, resounding resolutions, and diligent communication with their local Congressman on a broad spectrum of crises ranging from chemical pesticides to the Bomb. In turn, from that patient man, they received comforting reassurances that he was indeed manning the ramparts and looking narrowly in the direction they had pointed out to him.

Thus, one way or another, they harmlessly exploded their fears, energies, and frustrations and enjoyed a mellow feeling of superiority and importance to boot. Having neither native nor acquired talents, Jean concentrated on the one thing she knew something about, Housatonic society. But in turning all her thoughts and feelings inward on her own social status, she ran the increasing danger of implosion.

Originally, Al had represented an unassailable social refuge to her, the ultimate answer, and she had been overwhelmed to win him in marriage. It was only little by little, in a catty variation of the striptease, that Sally and her Old Guard retinue had bared their lingering reservations about him because of his Irish grandmother.

In the relatively subtle way that such information is imparted, nothing direct ever had been said to her. One day she woke up and just knew. Though in all fairness she couldn't blame Al, she felt a festering resentment that somehow he



had let her down. Independently, she had set out to secure the Babcock family socially, and it hadn't all been easy going.

To get the shininess off her maiden name, to substitute the dull rub that was old, accepted Housatonic, she had labored in the Garden Club, though the grubby work spoiled her manicure, and she had forced an interest in other correct and equally uninspiring causes.

She dressed in tweedy conservatism, knowing that dowdiness might be laughed at, but chic was unforgivable. She had long since severed relations with Housatonic High, never attending reunions or even acknowledging the chirrupy letters from the class secretary. Always in her good works, and especially in the intimacy of good works' many standing committees, she strove to associate with those whom she would have called, if she had been able to tell the truth to herself, her "betters."

And yet she never felt quite on an even footing with Sally, impregnable in local background and with a Queen Motherly self-esteem, nor with Margie, tart that she was and slightly overdressed besides.

Now that she and Al seemed to be drifting apart and the children gradually reaching toward independence, her ambitions were becoming an obsession. From hopes, they had hardened into imperatives that were in collision with her insecurities and frustrations. She was beginning to feel trapped.

The doorbell rang.

"Yes?"

Her voice was sharp. She expected a salesman or one of those impossible Jehovah's Witnesses.

But when she opened the door it was Sally.

A proper dowager would have phoned before dropping in at the ungodly hour of nine-thirty on a Monday. But, like Commodore Emeritus Peabottom, Sally cultivated the tactic of aggressive surprise, and she waged social intercourse the way he conducted cross-examinations: a technique that might be defined as Yankee judo. That is, she made a sudden and unsettling attack to which the victim overreacted in hostility or apology. Then Sally disarmingly backed away,

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catching the poor devil, usually female, off balance a second time. Thus, first by surprise and second by confusion, Sally had the victim where she wanted her.

"Sally! I'm sorry. I didn't expect—I mean, I'm not dressed."

"Pish, Jean Babcock. I should do the apologizing. I really hadn't intended to call. But I was just passing by and suddenly I remembered there was something I wanted to ask you about. May I?"

"Oh, yes. Of course. Do come in, please! But don't mind the condition of the house."

Sally settled herself on the sofa. Her eyes took in the unemptied ash trays, the crumpled pillows, the Sunday newspapers still on the coffee table. She didn't say anything. The almost imperceptible elevation of the exquisitely tweezed eyebrows said it for her.

At sixty, Sally was plump but still well-figured. Her blue-tinted gray hair was perfectly coiffed and her hands so beautifully preserved and manicured that it was difficult to think of her as a moving spirit in the Garden Club. Actually, she bought the flowers from the florist and specialized in arrangements.

Leaders in any field, the law, military, politics, society, even labor, have a presence that communicates impressively. It is a compound of authority, great self-confidence, and condescension, all politely repressed and below the surface, but there just the same.

Sally spoke in that totally assured, almost arrogant tone that is "society." In conversation, her bland assumption of all the leads and endings left her auditors with the opportunity only to sandwich in a word of explanation or agreement. Nobody disagreed. Her effortless flow of small talk was so gracious, at least on the surface, that to oppose her would seem downright rude.

Say what you want about the values involved, there is still a lot to be said for the sincere, hard-working snob. Sally had paid in much work and sacrifice, as well as in money, to reach her present eminence.

Her figure was the result of a Spartan diet and total

abstinence. Her ever perfectly groomed appearance came from weekly visits to the hairdresser, monthly shopping expeditions, and three daily changes of attire. She had never been seen lounging in bermudas, never caught in housecoat and curlers as she had caught Jean this morning.

Yet this frightening impeccability was only preparatory to the work that consumed the rest of her time: board and committee meetings, teas, the eternal round of charity balls and benefits at which Housatonic's privileged enjoyed themselves under the pretext that they were really doing it all for the sick and the poor.

In her triumphant reign as Sally the First, she had little time for her husband, which didn't make much difference, because he was a vague, doddering old ass, and there were no children, which was a blessing all around.

As a little girl, Sally had played more with her dollhouses than with her dolls. She had endlessly rearranged the tiny furniture but had never played at feeding a doll or changing its diapers. Things, not people, fascinated her. Behind her façade of overpoweringly gracious femininity, she worshipped power as ruthlessly and realistically as Peabottom, and she possessed about as much maternal instinct as he did.

"You know, of course, Jean, that Judge Peabottom is bringing a new young man into his firm?"

"Somebody named Dreyer?"

"Yes, Joe Dreyer."

If Sally called him "Joe," the Dreyers must be accepted. "I've heard nice things about him," she said dutifully.

"Well, in his very considerate way, Judge Peabottom wants to see that Helen gets to know people. Poor dear, being a widower, so lost, he didn't know how to go about it. So I have taken over for him."

"Helen?"

"Yes, Joe Dreyer's wife. You remember her. All the girls at the Garden Club liked her very much."

"I'm afraid I missed that meeting."

"Well, no matter. I'm proposing her for membership, and I want you to write the seconding letter."

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Jean was flattered but suspicious. She didn't understand why Sally was going out of her way to enlist her support. Besides, Jean felt instinctively hostile to newcomers who were quickly accepted. Let them serve a decent period of probation, as she had!

"I'm afraid I just don't know her, Sally, and while I do want to cooperate, wouldn't you prefer to ask somebody else?"

"Oh, we can arrange a meeting easily enough. I'll have a tea when I can get around to it, but let me give you the necessary facts about her now. I am *so* busy on the Cotillion!"

Jean was dying to ask whether Liz's name was on the list of debutantes to be presented, but managed to restrain herself.

"I don't have to tell you, Jean, that properly there should be three months between the announcement of the list and the coming-out. Very confidentially, Ann Jenkins made a botch—a perfect *botch*—of the whole thing as Cotillion chairman. I don't care if her husband *was* in a bad auto accident! The delay has been inexcusable."

Unexpectedly, Sally laughed. It was a mechanical sound, the volume and duration of which she manufactured in her larynx to fit different conversational situations. This was just a little tinkle to indicate that a sudden, amusing thought, unconnected with her visit, had just popped into her mind. Which wasn't the truth.

"Jean, something amusing just struck me. I don't know whether you know it or not, but there seems to be some kind of delay in Admissions at the Club about the Dreyers. How perfectly idiotic! Here you and I are going to sponsor Helen for the Garden Club and Al is—well, I don't say that he's keeping them *out* of Housatonic Yacht and Tennis. But he certainly isn't helping them to get *in*."

"I didn't know that, Sally. Al never talks to me about Admissions."

Sally nodded grimly. "I don't know what gets into men these days. I would think they would keep their minds on their business—Lord knows they talk enough about it!—and leave the social things to those who know something about

them. Next thing, they'll be trying to mastermind the Cotillion, too."

"I was wondering about the Cotillion."

Jean's voice was tentative, and another controlled laugh, a little louder and longer to indicate amused, friendly condescension, interrupted. "I know, I know! All you mothers are the same. You're thinking of Liz, of course."

"I know she is young, Sally, but she's precocious and she's going away to school next year."

Although they were alone, Sally lowered her voice confidentially and leaned forward on the sofa.

"You've put your finger on it. Very much *entre nous*, there *has* been some disagreement in the committee. They *do* think she's very young. You can appreciate that. Of course, I'm doing all I can. Her long lashes, those Irish eyes *so* remind me of her dear great-grandmother. Poor old Kate!"

Sally's hands fluttered in modest self-deprecation. "I can't do it alone, of course. I don't *run* things. I'm trying to get Paul Ling's wife on my side. And there are one or two others on the committee who happen to be friends of the Dreyers. But don't worry, Jean. Even if worst comes to worst, there's always next year, though of course I won't be on the committee a second time."

"I just thought of something, Sally."

"Yes?"

"Maybe I should talk to Al about the Dreyers."

"Why, the idea never occurred to me, Jean. But, now that you mention it, yes, I think it would be helpful. I *really* think so."

"I will, Sally. I certainly will!"

"Fine. I wish I weren't so pressed for time, or I'd arrange that tea right away. Say! I'm on my way right now to see Helen Dreyer. Why don't you come along?"

"But I'm not dressed."

"You just run upstairs and slip into something."

Sally calmly assumed people would do her bidding, and Jean obeyed almost like a child. She was glad for the chance to be alone for a few minutes and compose herself. She

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truly hadn't known about the bind in Admissions, nor that, in the inscrutable workings of Heaven and Housatonic society, the destinies of this pushy new couple and of Liz had interlocked.

If Al got stubborn as he so easily could, if he put that silly Admissions above his own daughter's happiness, it would be unforgivable! After all she had done, she just wouldn't let him.

But the minute she entered the Dreyer house with Sally, she knew that she didn't like Helen Dreyer, that the woman just didn't belong in Housatonic.

Partly it was the décor, so unlike the heavy, dusty Victorian atmosphere of the Babcock home. Perhaps, Jean conceded, angular metal furniture with spindly tubular legs might be admissible in a kitchen or breakfast nook. But in the living room, never! Compounding the error, she thought, was the glaring white and gold color scheme and the incomprehensible modernistic daubs that splotched the walls in two or three places.

But mostly it was the woman. To Jean, who was beginning to have a weight problem, Helen almost insolently flouted the slim firmness of youth in her purple and white silk blouse and tight Capri pants. She seemed so damned self-possessed for a newcomer, too. Actually, in the presence of the formidable Sally and this stranger who radiated hostility, Helen was fighting to hide her nervousness.

Jean glanced at the open, recessed bookshelves that took up one wall of the living room. There were no sets of World's Great Literature but mostly dog-eared paperbacks on history and economics. On the long, low Italian coffee table with black-painted iron legs, she saw *Harper's* and *The Reporter* but not *House Beautiful*. The woman was obviously an intellectual.

"Jean, this is Helen Dreyer whom I've been telling you about."

"How do you do, Mrs. Dreyer. Sally has said such nice things."

"Thank you, Mrs. Babcock. I had the pleasure of meeting

your husband on Opening Day at Housatonic Yacht and Tennis."

"Really? I'm afraid he forget to mention it."

Immediately, Sally took over the conversation, and thereafter only an occasional smile, nod, or dutiful assent was required from the two younger women.

Helen wasn't particularly surprised by Jean's hostility. Despite Sally's chaperonage, she had sensed resistance in the other women in this unfriendly town, and, in this very much like Jean, she was beginning to feel trapped. As Sally chattered on, she thought back to how she had gotten into this mess and wondered desperately how she was going to get herself out of it.

"Mama!"

"Yes, Papa?"

The words were her earliest recollections: her father's domineering bark and the soft answer of her gentle mother, ever anxious to please or placate him. In early childhood, Helen began rebelling against the narrowness in religion, social activities, even dress that her father imposed on their home.

But she never quite mustered the courage to fight him, never felt really free until she went away to college in the Middle West, far from their home in New York. When she graduated *magna cum laude* and told her father what she wanted to do, there was a dreadful row. He demanded that she come home forthwith to await the suitors he would present. She wanted to go on to law school in Boston and, with the unexpectedly firm help of her mother, she prevailed.

It was the happiest time of her life. Unlike New York, where the colleges are scattered and the students diluted thinly through the five boroughs, Boston is a concentration of colleges and the academic life. Helen ran with a crowd of young graduate intellectuals, post-Beatniks, long since past misty-eyed undergraduate liberalism, but still mentally pliable, agitated about the future, outraged over the status quo, voluble, exhilaratingly alive and healthy.

To them, race, creed, color were meaningless, and in the

clique were Negroes, Jews, Chinese, New York Italians, and the son of a Polish-born city fireman. In fact, they were so emphatic in dismissing race, creed, color as meaningless that, quite obviously, they were privately fighting, rationalizing, or apologizing for the vestigial cultures of their childhood, still in a revolt against them that had not yet been won.

With the aplomb of a Yale man and Harvard Law student, Joe Dreyer easily dominated them. He was a brilliant, talkative extrovert and much too assured about his past to feel any uncertainties. If he was faintly condescending, they didn't mind it, and Helen was fascinated by this glib, supremely self-confident young man. In her own revolt against the true but archaic things of value that were her cultural heritage, she fell in love with him. At the end of the year when he graduated, she gave up law school, and they eloped.

They came to New York, and Joe was taken on by one of the multinamed corporation law firms that offer more prestige than money to promising young attorneys out of Yale or Harvard at the top of their classes. In the beginning, the marriage was romantic, exciting, and Helen was almost childishly pleased to learn to cook and budget and wait impatiently for Joe to come home at night.

Gradually, in a way she could never quite put her finger on, things changed. She missed the intellectual stimulation, the casual social life she had known in Boston, and she didn't know how to go about filling the vacuum.

Joe was no help. He took her to New Jersey on one duty call to his parents and, as they drove past, pointed out the little club he had once belonged to. He made no effort to get together with former classmates and their wives and only once brought home a fellow young lawyer for dinner because they were working on a case together.

He began working late more and more often, then dining at the Yale Club and "conferring" until midnight with clients. These conferences caused noticeable alcoholic and amorous side effects, and Helen, waiting up for him, felt relieved and at the same time cringed when she heard the key scraping uncertainly in the apartment lock.



"I feel like a whore with a ring on!" she shouted at him one night, and he didn't speak to her afterward for three days.

Nonetheless, when the opportunity came to join Peabottom, Hardy & Ling and get away from the metropolitan loneliness, Helen felt forebodings.

"I don't want to go to a small city, Joe," she protested. "I don't think I'd quite fit in. I don't know anything about that kind of life."

"Nonsense! Remember your Bible. Whither thou goest I go."

"It's not *my* Bible. And it's archaic. Isn't modern marriage supposed to be a partnership?"

"Look! I'm breaking my ass to get someplace. I'm buried alive where I am, and this hick law firm is our chance for the good life that you're always nagging about. In five years I'll be the top man. There are only two seniors now. Age will take one of them, and I'll take care of the other."

"I hate it when you talk that way, Joe. It's so cold and calculating."

He shrugged and made a drink.

"If you insist, Joe, all right. But please promise me one thing. Try not to drink so much. You know people talk in small towns."

"Just don't nag. I know what I'm doing. I've completely sold old Peabottom. He even wants to put us up for his Club. And I've even picked out a house for us."

"A house! Why didn't you tell me? What kind of a house? How big is it?"

"It's my little surprise. You'll see, everything's taken care of. All you have to do is be the nice, respectable wife of Housatonic's new leading lawyer. With maybe a little more social airs than you're used to, but they'll come once you get to mixing with the right people."

"Helen!"

She winced. It was the tone Papa had always used.

"Helen! Where *are* you! I thought I'd come home for a bite

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of lunch. These local restaurant chefs aren't exactly *cordon bleu*. Oh, company? How do you do, Sally. So nice of you to visit my lonely little wife."

"Joe, I would like to have you meet Jean Babcock."

"Al's wife? Nice to know you, Jean. Won't you both join us for lunch? Helen really cooks quite well."

"We'd love to, but Jean and I have stayed much longer than we should. We all got to talking, and the time just flew."

When they had left, Helen turned on him. "Joe, I'm frightened."

"What on earth of?"

"Sally is going to nominate me for the Garden Club, and I can tell that that Babcock woman hates me."

"Al's wife? So what? Probably she's just stuffy, like that husband of hers. The hell with them."

In the casual, arrogant way that he had of taking status for granted, Joe Dreyer typified second-generation money. Before selling out and retiring to New Jersey, his father had owned the biggest factory in a small Kansas town where caste wasn't as sharply measured as in the East. And what status there was the Dreyer family automatically enjoyed.

When Joe had come East to prep school and college, he brought along enough self-importance and money to run with the wealthy kids. He fell in with them without conscious effort and when he went to their homes for the Christmas and Easter vacations, their aristocratic parents accepted him because their sons did. Had he been first-generation money striving for acceptance, or third- or fourth-generation with the pride and importance of position driven into him from childhood, he would have had a keener, more respectful attitude toward status.

Now he was discovering for the first time that self-assurance and school name-dropping were not enough to guarantee full social acceptance. He had been surprised, then angry at Al's cool Yankee reserve, and now the same sort of thing seemed to be happening to Helen. Instead of sympathizing, he felt irritated with her.

"You know I didn't want to move here, Joe. This isn't New York. Something unpleasant is going to happen."

"I said the hell with them. Period."

"Joe, I want to call up and withdraw my name from the Garden Club."

"And force me to make all kinds of explanations and apologies to old Peabottom? Helen, I forbid it!"

## ► Chapter Six

JUNE
TUESDAY
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For Al, the weekend at the Club was long and wet, and the next day was one of those penitential, ineffectual Mondays. He had killed the time mostly in unnecessary dictating and, with throbbing head, had forced himself to phone around town and set up appointments for later in the week. It didn't bring in any money, but it had salved his conscience, anyhow.

Shortly before five, just as he was getting ready to go home, Paul Ling had called. An upstater who planned to open a store in Housatonic was stopping at the hotel overnight. He would be available for dinner and discussion later in his room if Al wanted to pitch for his insurance.

At this particular time, from this particular source, the tip came by more than coincidence, and Al had wished he could turn it down. But with the kids getting more expensive every year, he needed all the business he could scrounge,

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God knew, and so he had spent the whole evening with the prospect.

Tonight, Tuesday, was the first time he and Jean had been together since Sally's visit. As soon as the dinner dishes were stacked and the kids had wandered off to the TV room, she turned on him. Her tone was urgent and reproachful.

"I've got to talk to you. I've been waiting since yesterday noon."

"I'm sorry about last night. It was business."

"Why didn't you wake me this morning?"

Christ! Try to do the woman a favor by letting her sleep and you're still wrong.

"I wasn't hungry. I got coffee and rolls on the way to the office."

"Well, this is important. It's about Sally and Liz."

"Will you give me about half an hour? There's some stuff I have to go through."

"I'll call you. This can't wait another day."

In the privacy of his den, on the second-floor rear, Al got out the Dreyer file and spread the papers on his desk, staring at them with distaste.

There were the application form which Dreyer had completed in a scrawling, aggressive hand; the supporting letters from members correctly written on Club stationery adorned with its little blue-white burgee; carbons of Al's inquiries to the non-Club references and, probably in his accumulated mail, their replies.

Dreyer was a wrongo. He *knew* it. But he would have to prove it unquestionably. In view of Peabottom's formidable support, hunches didn't count. Or heroism. The old man was a covering battle wagon, Al just a skinny attack boat.

In reality, the situation was more like a mystery novel. Somewhere in this file, he must find the clue he needed so desperately. Or give up.

On the surface, the membership application form was so simple and forthright, and yet it was so neatly booby-trapped.

Full name *and* parents' full names, including mother's maiden name. To name-changers, it was the first hurdle in

Housatonic's little obstacle race. If second-generation "foreigners" told the truth, they ran a grave risk, as they knew, of not being accepted. If they lied, and Admissions discovered it, they were definitely out.

Wife's maiden name and *her* background, schools and organizations (Junior League, very good; a garden club, good; League of Women Voters, doubtful) could be small-craft warnings. Especially if they matched her husband's educational and military record, which was weighed in scales delicate enough to register each carat of status.

Preferably, one of the old Connecticut or Massachusetts prep schools, but any prep over a high school. In the colleges, first the Ivy League, then *any* private college, and, last, the state universities. Marks or *laudes* didn't count at all.

Though Housatonic in theory insisted that boating men must always get first preference, in reality the youngest *commissioned* Reservist outranked a chief bosun with twenty years at sea. In fact, the only noncoms among the membership were a few college drop-outs who'd been drafted during World War II and Korea.

"Other clubs" carried a delicate message to Al. He first looked hopefully to see whether the candidate had belonged to some really good club, preferably, though not necessarily, a yacht club. If he had, Al relaxed; another Admissions committee had done the spadework for him. All he had to do was make sure that the fellow hadn't subsequently loused himself up as sometimes happens even in the finest Anglo-Saxon families.

He heavily discounted the luncheon and service clubs, business and professional organizations. Almost anybody in the right fields could join them. And the college clubs, for that matter. A lot of clinkers went to college these days, and afterwards they all stuck together.

Thus, in Joe Dreyer's case, he had written, methodically but not hopefully, to the Yale Club in New York. The answer had come today.

"In reply to inquiry of recent date, we wish to state that

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Mr. Joseph Dreyer, Class of 1951, Yale College, is a member of the Yale Club in good standing." The usual form reply.

Ordinarily, Housatonic also asked for references from three nonmember friends of the candidate. One of these—Al prided himself on the brainstorm—was to come from an associate in the candidate's firm.

On the grand but not quite accurate objection that business had no place in a gentlemen's club, Jon Winston had objected at first to any commercial reference. The reason, as Al had explained, and even Jon had had to go along, was that today everybody is either an executive or an executive assistant. But what, precisely, is his job, and how important is he in the firm?

Naturally, for a club reference, he will go, not to an underling, but to the highest boss he knows intimately. And thus Admissions can approximate his relative stature in his organization. A nice point, Jon had conceded.

In Joe Dreyer's case, professional status was already established—too well established!—by the testimony of Peabottom. So Al had written to the only two nonmember references supplied by Joe: a former classmate and Dean Beswick, of the Episcopal church Joe once had attended down in New Jersey. Their replies had arrived today, too.

Quickly, Al slit open the envelopes, scanned the letters, and pushed them aside impatiently. About what you'd expect from a classmate and a padre. Then he read them again, more slowly. To an Admissions chairman, the most significant things that friends say are what they don't say.

Despite the good-old-Joe clichés, Dreyer's former classmate indicated that their intimacy had continued for only a year or so after graduation. Curious, Al thought, that Dreyer hadn't given him a more contemporary reference.

And the good Dean, that left-footed Monsignor, had written with Christian courtesy, but no visible Christian warmth, that Mr. Dreyer indeed at one time had been a communicant at St.-Mark's-in-the-Fields. He did not say that he would be pleased to be remembered to his former parishioner.

That was rather curious.

In neither letter, Al noticed, was the usual sonorous sentence, "I can unhesitatingly recommend Joe to your Club as a gentleman and a sportsman who, I feel confident, will make an excellent member."

Again, odd.

Or was he building a case on air against Dreyer because of his own prejudice? Why *was* he being so stubborn, Al wondered. Did he really have the good of Housatonic at heart, or was this just one of those unfortunate head-bumpings politely described as "personality conflicts"?

Prudently, Al kept in mind the potential implications to his insurance business and to his Club ambitions and, when he had to, would compromise on a sticky candidate. Compromise is civilized and intelligent, he told his conscience, but now he wondered: how far can a man back up and still keep his self-respect?

Anyhow, whatever his motivation—the good of Housatonic, his resentment of Dreyer's arrogance, or reaction to Peabottom's pressuring—this time he was out to hang a man.

Al reread the Yale letter. Cool, correct, but noncommittal.

Among Admissions and Membership chairmen, there exists a loose national conspiracy to keep the bounders out of all clubs, and they are guardedly cooperative in answering each other's inquiries.

When Al received a query about a Housatonic member whom he respected, he scribbled an answer on the inquiry itself—"Fine fellow! Nice family, prompt pay. A. Babcock, Admissions Chairman."

If he couldn't say something like that in all good conscience, he would dictate a stiff reply that said, "In answer to your inquiry our records indicate that Mr. Blank has been a member in good standing of this Club for X years. Period, Sincerely, etc."

Without violating the laws of libel or good manners, he felt, that carried the message.

Now why hadn't the Yale membership secretary gone beyond the merely correct for Joe Dreyer?

Hell, I'm building a good case on nothings. An old legal

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war-horse like Peabottom could tear it to pieces in five minutes.

Though he knew they were hogwash, he again went over the supporting letters from Housatonic's own members.

*Yale '51. Tennis team. Charming couple. Want to buy a boat. Friends of the Commodore Emeritus.*

Every letter said that, and not one said anything more. In fact, Tom Andrews' shakily scribbled missive misspelled Helen's name, making it Helene. Obviously, they all had met the Dreyers briefly at the Club or at a cocktail party, and Paul Ling had told them what to write. The cipher kept getting bigger.

And another omission, Al suddenly remembered.

Everyone in the Club knew that Admissions met candidates on the third Friday of the month. Now, four days later, not one of the Dreyer supporters had called to ask about their prospects.

Al disliked and tried to discourage pressures on Admissions, especially from those members who never did a damned bit of Club work themselves and rather acted as though he got paid for the job. Sometimes, he reminded overly persistent callers about the rule in one austere New York club: that, if a member so much as approached Admissions about a candidate, the poor fellow was immediately dead.

That was too harsh for Housatonic where every man thought of himself as the Commodore, and, as a matter of fact, the calls served one good purpose. Al used them to gauge whether the supporters were perfunctory or truly enthusiastic in behalf of their applicant.

Several calls, good candidate. No calls, so-so candidate. Of course, with the Dreyers, there was just possibly the arrogant assumption that they were already in since Peabottom had given his personal benediction. If that were the case, Al liked it even less.

Impatiently, he shoved the barren file into the Club drawer of his desk which he always kept locked.

To him, all the nothings, the nonenthusiasm of the out-



siders, the nonknowledge of the supporters, the nonfollow-up, were almost conclusive. But there still wasn't one hard fact.

He turned to his personal mail which had been piling up on the desk since Saturday.

Among the bills and advertisements—undoubtedly because the return address was merely a post office box number—Jean had mistakenly included the reply from the little club in New Jersey.

Al hesitated to open it. This was his last clue.

The letter was written in the shaky penmanship of an old man. Al's heart sank at its terseness.

"Dear Mr. Babcock, I beg to advise that the membership of Mr. Joseph Dreyer in this Club has terminated. Respectfully, Andrew Jones, Membership Secretary."

That was all except for a New Jersey phone number in the lower left-hand corner. Why the devil had the old fool put that in?

Al read each word slowly: "... membership ... has terminated. . ." Curious phrasing.

Not *was* terminated, which would have indicated expulsion, the very thing Al was looking for. Nor, on the other hand, did it indicate that Dreyer had resigned.

Mr. Jones, I apologize for calling you an old fool. I believe that you want to tell me something.

Excitedly, Al called the operator, found the area code number for the town in Jersey, and dialed. He remembered the human old days when placing a long-distance call had been sort of fun. You could hear the relay of operators talking to each other and sometimes you caught highly interesting snatches of conversation that you weren't supposed to hear. Now there were just a few impersonal electronic clicks, and then the phone in New Jersey rang.

"Jones here!" an old man's voice said briskly.

"This is Alvin Babcock in Housatonic, Mr. Jones. I hope I am not calling too late."

"Usually go to bed right at nine."

"Sorry, sir."

"Go ahead, young fellow."

► *Tuesday, June 21*

"I am calling in reference to a letter that I just received from you about a candidate for membership in Housatonic Yacht and Tennis Club."

"No names over the phone, Babcock!"

"Certainly not, sir. But about this—this party. There was something in your letter that I didn't quite understand."

From below, Jean called up to him. "It's long past half an hour. I want to get this business off my chest."

Al cupped the mouthpiece.

"Dammit, I'm on the phone! I'll be with you as soon as I can."

Through the receiver, all the way from New Jersey, he heard a nasal bugle blast.

Like Peabottom, the old codger was giving the proper prefatory sound effect to an important announcement. The technique, he suddenly thought, must go all the way back to the days of knights and heralds.

"Glad you called, Babcock. Hoped you'd have the sense to."

Apparently Jones knew, or thought he knew, something. Slim as the lead might prove, Al was exultant that he had played it out.

"Good club you have there in Housatonic. Second cousin of my father on his mother's side once belonged. Wouldn't want you to make some damned fool mistake."

"About this party?" Al said and tried to keep the impatience out of his voice.

"I'm coming to that, Babcock. I'm coming to it. In a word, sir, a chippy chaser."

"A what?"

"What's the matter? Connection bad? Chippy chaser, I said."

"Oh, yes, sir. Sorry."

That quaint phrase out of the past for a lecher. He remembered that his own father had used it.

"Drinks too much, too."

"You mean, sir?"

"Mean what I say. Drinks too much. That's clear enough, isn't it?"

"Then I take it, sir, that on the basis of your club's experience, you would not recommend this candidate?"

"Hell, no, young man! Haven't you been listening?"

Al's voice was tentative. "I appreciate that, in all probability you will want this kept confidential, Mr. Jones?"

"Damned right I do, young fellow! Don't quote me. I'm just talking gentleman to gentleman."

"Do you suppose that, without mentioning any names, you could send me some kind of a vague note? At least, then I would have something to show to my committee."

"Course not! You know better. Couldn't put anything in writing. Probably shouldn't even say it. Mean devil, and a lawyer, too. Makes a nasty combination, Babcock."

"Gentleman to gentleman, sir, we are having a little problem here about this matter."

"Ha! Pressure, I suppose. Fellow pulled a lot of strings here, too. To get in and then to keep from being kicked out."

"Yes, sir, very heavy pressure."

Al's voice was now mournfully pleading. "I can understand your reluctance to write, sir. But if I could, in the strictest confidence and with the greatest discretion, quote you only to my board . . ."

"Course you can't! Don't want a slander suit. Not to your board, not even to your committee. Can't believe Jersey is the only state with leaky walls."

Al felt a twinge of guilt, and was irritated with himself for feeling it. But now that he had the old boy on the phone, he had to find out something about Helen.

"One more question, Mr. Jones. What about the lady who is involved?"

"What lady? The fellow was never seen with a lady. Only chippies."

"The wife, I mean."

"Must have married her after the termination—by mutual consent—from us."

Though his last lead had now washed out, Al was relieved. At least he had turned up nothing against Helen.

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"Getting late," Jones said impatiently. "Past nine already. Better say good night."

"I don't mean to impose on your patience, sir. But you understand my position. A really final question."

"Sort of pushy, your generation. Well, go ahead."

"Is there any other way I could check out what you have told me?"

"Not that I know of."

That was it. The end of the trolley line.

"Wait a minute! My father's second cousin was very friendly with a certain family in Housatonic."

"Probably dead now," Al said. "We've had a lot of changes in this town."

"Not quite so fast, young man. Don't you have a sprig in your club who carries three Roman numerals on the end of his name?"

"Why, certainly! That must be—"

"Not so specific! Wouldn't possibly be more than one like that, would there?"

"No, sir."

"Tell you what I can do, Babcock. You tell Mr. Three Ones to expect a call from an old friend of his family in New York. Fellow who knows this fellow we have reference to. Knows what he's been up to recently. Ha! As if there's much doubt. I'll see that he makes the call."

Al was jubilant. "Mr. Jones, I don't know how to thank you!"

"Don't try, my boy. If gentlemen don't stick together, who will stick up for them? Washington? That bunch? Ha! Glad to do it, young fellow. Glad to see some decent, old-fashioned club spirit still exists."

"Mr. Jones, if you are ever in the neighborhood of Housatonic and could possibly use a guest card, I would be only too honored."

"Very nice of you, Babcock. I'll remember. It's getting quite late. Good night."

"Good night, sir!"

Al depressed the receiver, then quickly dialed a local

Housatonic number. He got a busy signal and hung up. A moment later, his phone rang.

"Al? Peabottom. I trust that you have not forgotten that Executive sits next Monday?"

"No, sir. Admissions will have two candidates to submit."

"The Dreyers?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but the posting period won't have expired."

"Come, boy!"

"There's something else that I can't discuss on the phone, Commodore. I can assure you that I expect all the loose ends to be cleared up by Tuesday. And I've already called Admissions to a special meeting Tuesday night to expedite Joe Dreyer."

I don't have to say that he might be expedited out instead of in, Al added grimly to himself.

Peabottom's gruff, authoritarian voice mellowed slightly, but was still edged with suspicion. "I couldn't possibly imagine what can't be discussed on the phone. If you think there's a problem, for heaven's sake come to me, boy, rather than wasting time. I have all the necessary facts."

"Thank you, sir. I'm sorry about the posting, but I thought you would be pleased we are meeting so promptly."

"Of course I am," Peabottom said reluctantly. But, no doubt about it, Al was getting a little big for his britches. He'd better take him down a peg. "I suppose we can't waive the full ten days, though frankly I do feel you are being a bit technical, Al. One must be punctilious, I always say, but a man of Flag potential also must always be sure that he doesn't lose sight of the forest for the trees."

It was just a gentle reminder that Al had better be a good boy if he expected to make Fleet Captain next year. He hoped, he truly did, that this nephew of his old friend Ben Babcock took after the Babcocks and not his mother's impossibly stubborn Irish side of the family. But he was beginning to wonder and, if the message didn't penetrate, he would have to act.

Peabottom sighed heavily. Like any old combat veteran, he'd been in too many fights ever to start one with any

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enthusiasm. Sometimes, unfortunately, these young fellows, too ambitious, too feisty, forced you into them. They were to blame, and he didn't believe for a minute that old men made the wars that young men had to fight.

"Well, not too much harm done yet, Al. I can call special meetings of Executive and the full Board later next week, I daresay. I'll expect to hear from you late Tuesday evening. No later than Wednesday morning. Good night, Al."

"Good night, Commodore."

How should he play it?

If he went to the old man and told him frankly what he knew about Dreyer, Peabottom would demand proof. And since Al could not involve Jones, he would have no proof unless the mysterious phone call provided corroboration.

On the other hand, if he held back, and the proof did come through, Peabottom would be furious that things had gone so far without his knowledge. After all, as Old Mr. Housatonic, he expected to be consulted even on each month's menus, let alone something so important as his own protégé.

Either way, Al was boxed in.

In the fine old Babcock tradition, he thought ruefully, when in doubt, do nothing. I'll just play it out the way it has already started.

He dialed the number he had tried earlier.

"Jon? This is Al. In strictest confidence?"

"You sound cloak-and-daggerish."

Jon's voice was petulant. Basically, Al represented sound Old Housatonic, but in little ways he ruffled Jon. He was a bit too ambitious, not quite sufficiently respectful of the authority vested in Peabottom. And even a bit of a showoff, Jon thought, remembering resentfully that Al had always beaten him in Junior racing.

"What is of the strictest confidence?" he asked.

"You will be getting a long-distance call in a day or two from an old family friend in New York."

"What the devil is this all about?"

"Admissions."

"Oh. Something sticky?"

"Very."

"Now if this is about what it could be about, Al, my position is highly embarrassing. I was just talking with Peabottom fifteen minutes ago, and he is quite annoyed by the delay on the Dreyers."

"I'll take the fall."

"Then why put me in the middle in the first place?"

"I didn't, Jon. It just worked out that way. That's what I wanted to explain. I don't want you to get sore."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Call me as soon as you hear. That's all."

Jon had no belly for trouble, but this seemed to be a small favor that Al was asking. One thing you couldn't fault Al for was his conscientiousness about Admissions, and Jon felt a duty to support him, at least short of any distressing showdown fight.

"Oh, all right. Good night, Al."

"Good night. But just *call*, will you?"

From the living room, Jean called out indignantly, "I've been waiting and waiting! What *is* all this phoning about?"

"Admissions."

"Stop being so pompous! I'm your wife, remember? And I want to talk to you."

Al smothered a self-pitying sigh. Some sort of go-round with her over something seemed to be shaping up. "Come on up to the den, so we can close the door. I don't want the kids listening in."

Jean came up, panting a little from the climb, and shut the door not too quietly behind her. Her voice was sharp. "Sally told me something yesterday that opened my eyes. Why *must* you take that Dreyer case so seriously?"

"I'm not pompous, and Admissions is serious."

"Rubbish!"

"What did Sally tell you that's so damned important?"

"That Joyce Ling and one or two other supporters of the Dreyers just happen to be on the committee for the Cotillion."

"Jean, if you've been asked to relay any messages to me

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about the Dreyers, I don't want to hear them. Admissions isn't a back-door operation."

"Oh, stop it, Al. You sound like you're the Supreme Court, or something. If it weren't for that grandmother of yours, you wouldn't feel your Club position was so *dreadfully* important."

"Stop harping on Kate!"

Even though she had died at about the time he went into the Navy, Al could still see and hear the warm, witty, lively little Irishwoman with her delightful Mayo brogue and her extravagant affection for all her children and grandchildren. Al had loved her.

Even Al's father, although he was Housatonic Yankee all the way and though Kate was, after all, his mother-in-law, had genuinely liked her. So had most of the other Babcocks, though with more reservations, once they had recovered from their initial dismay.

But not cold, stubborn Uncle Ben. Northern Ireland, which was Protestant, he could have accepted. Southern, Catholic Ireland, never!

Till he died, he had delighted in sly allusions in front of Kate and Al's mother about the Irish or the Catholics. Kate hadn't minded. "Them as has airs," she would say in that maddeningly airy tone of dismissal that the Irish can employ so well.

Now that he was a man, Al realized from many little remembered things that Uncle Ben had been a coward. Kate, obviously, had taken his measure, too, and felt only contempt for him.

It had been much more difficult for Al's parents, for Ben's taunts were nicely measured. Just cutting enough to keep Al's father ruffled and protective about his wife and mother-in-law, never cutting enough to force a brotherly showdown.

Venomous as he was, Uncle Ben hadn't dared provoke the fight that would have cleared the air and forced him to accept his brother's family or leave the family business.

But a boy sees only the things that are half-concealed, not the frustrated meanness so deeply buried as was Ben's, and



what Al remembered was the hurt that his uncle had inflicted.

The sudden, strained look on his mother's face when Ben would chuckle humorlessly and say, "I heard a real funny one today about this Paddy just off the boat at Ellis Island." And his father's defensive, exasperated tone as he cut in, "Now that will be just enough, Ben!" And then Ben's smiling, totally insincere apology.

And once, in his mother's bedroom, a frightening scene that told him so much about her hidden hurt. Kate was there, an almost wildly sad look on her face that Al had never seen before, and she was rocking his mother in her arms and crooning over and over again, "Never mind him, macushla! Never mind him! It's only your husband who counts, and he loves you."

Al knew instinctively who the "him" was and after that he couldn't stand Uncle Ben, couldn't mumble anything more than a stiff "Thank you, sir" for a birthday present. Even at Thanksgiving, the high feast day of the Yankees, Ben's mere presence near the head of the long table took some of the sweetness out of the white meat and the traditional homemade stuffing of ground dried bread, oysters, and seasoning.

Jean's voice cut through the bittersweet memories. More and more, inexplicably, exasperatingly, Al was becoming aloof; he seemed to be going someplace where she couldn't follow. "For heaven's sake, stop mooning and say something!"

"All I can say, Jean, is that Kate was a grand old girl. If I'm at all ashamed of her, I'm ashamed of myself for being ashamed, if you follow. Forget her!"

"How can I forget her? She's still being thrown up in my face, in catty little ways. Sally always makes *that* perfectly clear."

"Damn Sally!"

"Easy to say—if you don't care whether your own daughter is presented at the Cotillion. And, I'm beginning to think, you don't."

"Of course I do. Three damns and a goddam, too!"

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"Please, Al, not quite so profane."

"Oh, stop being so ladylike, Jean. I realize perfectly well that these days social prestige is up for grabs. The war did something to this country. So did inflation. There are a lot of strange new rich people, and a lot of the nice old families have died or gone broke."

"What, precisely, has all that to do with Housatonic?"

"Right here, right now, social battle lines are being drawn that could last for years if the money does. The Ins and the Outs. That's why Admissions is so important."

"Frankly, Al, you're the one who is half-In and half-Out. They let you chairman Admissions, yes. But you're *not* supposed to get the idea that you run it."

"Jean!"

"Oh, don't sound insulted! You ought to hear what they say behind your back. You're 'lace curtain,' not 'shanty,' but you're still *Irish*."

"What about Dad? Yeah, what about him? Was he a member on approval, too?"

"No, but he never made Flag officer, did he? It was Uncle Ben."

"You admit he wasn't on approval. You just said so."

"That was different. He merely married a girl with Irish in her—not in him."

"Jean! This is—why, it's Hitlerism! And you say it so calmly, you go right along with it!"

Her voice was ugly in its flatness. "I'm a woman with a presentable daughter, and I go along with the facts of life, Al."

She paused a second. "However they cut."

"Even if they cut your husband?"

She looked him levelly in the eyes. "Even if they cut my husband—if they cut my daughter."

"What in God's name do you want?"

"A little common sense on your part, Al. About the Dreyers. Do you realize that I have been asked by Sally to second Mrs. Dreyer for the Garden Club? And you, at the

same time, are busily keeping them out of Housatonic. Truly, as Sally said, it's idiotic."

"Of course that's the way Sally would put it to you. And she also just happened to mention that friends of the Dreyers are on the Cotillion committee. So the Dreyers' admission to Housatonic Yacht and Tennis is the price of Liz's admission to the Cotillion?"

"Sally would never say it that way. But, in a word, yes. And most of the invitations have already been mailed out. You will have to do something right away."

"Why, this is blackmail, Jean. Social blackmail! Poor Liz is the hostage. It's degrading."

"Don't you care anything about your own home?"

Al laughed bitterly. "Home! Home today is just an open-end mortgage, the expensive place where you are finishing the expansion attic on time, and buying the dishwasher on installments, and saving for junior's college education—"

"Please!"

Al ignored her. "And trying to get your girl into a good school that you can't afford to keep her in if she does make it. As I personally damned well know!"

"I've heard quite enough, Al."

"Oh, no, you haven't, madam! I'll tell you what home is. It's keeping one lousy, expensive little status symbol ahead of the Joneses because that's the new, better American way of life, and in the process spending seventy-five dollars more monthly than you make. Home is a socioeconomic unit that the sociologists survey in their foreign language and the Department of Commerce correlates with recessions. That's home today, and there's damn little left in it for God to bless!"

"I think I'll take the children to visit Mother until you come to your senses."

"I think you ought to!"

"And if the Cotillion invitation doesn't arrive, Al, don't expect me back until September. I couldn't stand the humiliation."

JUNE
SATURDAY
25
JUNE
SUNDAY
26

From his father, Al Babcock had often heard fulsome praise about the old Housatonic City Club, a gloomy brownstone pile diagonally across from the public library on Main Street.

For the husband, temporarily deserted or permanently incompatible; for the widower, sod or grass; for the bachelor, Housatonic City, with its restful antisocial atmosphere, had been a delightful refuge. Hours, even days on end, in this male womb, warm, quiet, utterly protected from the world, the misogynists could happily read or brood, the gregarious could find poker or stimulating talk.

This weekend, with Jean sulking up at her mother's, Al would have been grateful for its kindly shelter. But like most of the old-fashioned gentlemen's clubs, Housatonic City had long since vanished under the impact of taxes, commuting, aggressive togetherness, and particularly the new ultraspecialized education which makes it so difficult even for cultured men to find a common conversational platform.

Like the medieval scholar who spoke Latin, the Yankee intellectual once had been the universal man, at ease and at home wherever he encountered another witty or inquiring

mind. Old Dr. McDonald and Al's father had shared a love for Elizabethan verse, and Jon Winston's father had been a minor authority on Italian painting, but except for Dr. McDonald, they were all gone now and their gracious dilettantism with them, and Housatonic City was the parking lot of a supermarket.

Instead, the businessman had become the universal man for, whatever his particular line, he responded knowingly to the eternal verities of corporation taxes, the common market, the imperative need for tighter regulation of the unions, and the sanctity of free enterprise. Housatonic's only surviving men's club was a businessmen's luncheon group, a dreary pride of sharp traders who pursued the dollar even as they ate and drank.

Perhaps the club's finest service was that by maintaining rooms in Housatonic Hotel its patronage helped keep that white-pillared structure alive against the inroads of the motels. But its quarters were closed on weekends, and Al couldn't even go there. And he was determined to keep away from Housatonic Yacht and Tennis. Last weekend had been wet enough, too wet, and now he would have to run a gauntlet of prying inquiries about Jean's absence.

Actually, with so many women and children overrunning the place, with a snack bar that served as a general store and its own green in the form of the Mall, a mixed club like HY&T wasn't a club at all. It was a re-creation, in bermudas, shorts, slacks, and bathing suits, of the old-fashioned New England village.

And, to many of its members, especially the commuters who were swallowed alive nine to five each weekday in the city, that was Housatonic's basic, unrealized charm.

The villager has complete knowledge of his little domain, complete unity and intimacy with his fellow villagers that he can never capture in the sprawling, uncaring city. And here, in a narrowness blocked off by the road, the Sound, and high wire fences on the other two sides, Housatonic's members, like their less sophisticated ancestors, found something they could totally know and totally embrace.

► *Saturday, June 25 and Sunday, June 26*

Like villagers, Housatonic's athletes and drinkers also were incorrigible gossips, and their social life was an accretion of monumental trifles never forgotten. Why, they still occasionally talked about the dance years ago when Jean, in a most unladylike display of jealousy, had cut in on *him*, leaving Margie stranded and for once nonplused in the middle of the floor.

Yes, he'd definitely stay home this weekend.

Resignedly, he started tackling the bachelor mess that had been accumulating since Jean's departure last Wednesday. He dumped the stacks of dirty plates, cups, and saucers into the dishwasher. Then he worked his way listlessly through the kitchen, the living room, and up to his bedroom and den, picking newspapers, ties, and socks off the floor, emptying the ash trays.

To him, the house looked tolerably shipshape, but with her technical housewife's eye, Al knew fatalistically, Jean would find a million things wrong the minute she walked in the front door. Might as well just stay sloppy and enjoy it, he thought. She'll complain anyhow.

Even four days after the blowup, he still felt angry toward her, but physically he was beginning to miss her. At their age, there was occasional impromptu love-making, especially after a drinking party at the Club, which always pleasantly startled Al. Tuesday and Friday nights were definitely reserved for love, and they both took the obligation very seriously. Like most couples in their forties, they felt the first cool whisper of waning passion and tried desperately to deny it.

Might as well wash the car and work off some energy, Al decided. Then if I mow the lawn, trim the hedge, and rake, I'll be tired enough for a couple of drinks, a TV dinner, a little TV afterward, and early to bed.

Dammit!

He'd forgotten the Maguire wedding. Mary Anne was Pat McDermott's niece, and he remembered back when he first was Junior Activities chairman and she had been the skinny little water rat who won the trophy for best in swimming, aged ten-and-under. Now she was old enough to marry, and

next season, in the predictable Irish way, she would no doubt be bringing the first of many offspring to the Club.

You didn't notice it with your own children, but other people's brats were exasperatingly fast in growing up these days and making you feel older and older. Stop pushing, Al wanted to snap at them.

Jean, who didn't like the Irish crowd, had sent her highly insincere regrets to the Maguires. But even if Al ducked the long Solemn High Mass in hot, stuffy little St. Peter's with its atrociously garish décor, he *couldn't* pass up the reception. Mary Anne and Pat would never forgive him. And that meant that in spite of his prudent high resolves he would have to go to the Club today after all.

When he arrived about two o'clock, the reception was noisily under way. The Maguires had taken over Housatonic's main dining room for three hours—a sizable tab which Pat was no doubt underwriting. Two tables had been pushed together, and two outside bartenders were shoveling out champagne to the ladies, mostly rye and bourbon to the men.

Pat, who drank only beer except at such festive occasions, was already a little high, and the bride's father was obviously determined to tie on a splendid one that would long be remembered in local A.O.H. circles. Dutifully, Al danced with the bride, and as he held this Cinderella in white chiffon, so miraculously transformed from a water rat, he felt sure that he was aging visibly.

Then he drank a toast with Pat, electing champagne because, with Jean away, he'd breakfasted lightly on toast and black coffee. He knew he had to pace himself.

Al felt a slap on the back, and the champagne glass danced precariously in his hand. It was Al Delancey, the banker who was handling the Club's refinancing problem.

"From one Al to another," he saluted.

Like the Catholic-Episcopalian dialogue between Pat and Jon Winston, this was another tedious running joke at Housatonic.

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"From one Al to another," Al responded correctly, lifting his glass.

Delancey's face became grave. "Seriously, Al. Something I wanted to ask you about. How are the Dreyers coming along?"

Al was nettled. He now used an Admissions tactic that usually put the other fellow on the defensive, "How much do you *really* know about him?"

Delancey was flustered.

"Well, Al, I know Peabottom is behind him. That's about enough. I know—and, God knows, so do you, sitting on the Board—that we need more members, more initiation fees, more dues."

A wedding reception was certainly a hell of a place to discuss Club business. Al's face showed his feelings.

"Now look, Al. I have to sell my loan committee on this refinancing deal. Banks aren't exactly wild about investing in clubs."

"You're more than secured by the property."

"Who wants to foreclose a club?" Delancey sounded horrified. "We'd make an enemy of every damned member, including some pretty important people in Housatonic. Personally, I'd rather foreclose a circus. And that's very bad banking practice because then *you* have to feed the animals."

"I understand. I can tell you that the Dreyer application is being expedited as fast as I can do it."

"Fine, Al! Then I can report to my loan committee that Housatonic is making progress on the membership situation. That's the word they want to hear. Progress."

And if they later hear that one couple has been turned down, will they withhold the loan? A pretty specious argument, Al thought, and I don't buy it. Peabottom was using Delancey to make him feel that the fate of Housatonic rested on Admissions' shoulders. All these sly pressures were becoming intolerable.

By now, the bridal couple had slipped away, and the more serious drinking had started.

The guests were practically all the Irish Group and Al felt a little out of it, but he was glad Jean hadn't come. The



party was no more uproarious than a Wasp reception. Nonetheless, she would have claimed confirmation for her prejudices about the "loud Irish," especially Pat McDermott who was now rendering *Mother Machree* in a strong, rolling baritone with an uncertain attack.

Like the bridal couple, Al quietly slipped away.

Now that he'd had just enough champagne to mellow him, he dreaded the prospect of going back to an empty house and slapping together a prepared meal that he would either under-heat or burn, no two ways about it. Couldn't do any real harm, he decided, to wander a bit till the champagne settled, then have a couple of drinks and maybe stay at the Club for dinner.

Why the hell shouldn't he?

Was *he* supposed to do solitary penance? Jean had left him, he hadn't left her. Oh, the hell with her! I just hope she phones, he thought maliciously. There'll be no answer, and she'll figure I'm here having a good time, but she'll be too proud to call the Club and make sure.

Probably ought to show his face at the courts to prove to the tennis crowd that he wasn't altogether against them. Near the outside bar, he bumped into Tom Andrews, drink as ever in hand, picking his way somewhat unsteadily toward the Mall.

"Al, I'd hoped to see you. I've got a question."

"Answer. Never drink before noon."

"Don't be frivolous about important things. I wanted to ask you about the Dreyers."

Even Tom, Housatonic's alcoholic Rip Van Winkle, had been awakened to put the squeeze on Al.

"I wrote for them, you know, Al. Very nice girl, that Helene."

"Her name happens to be Helen."

"What are their prospects, Al?"

"Admissions is expediting things as fast as we can."

"Relieved to hear it. There's been some odd talk. Real nice, that Helene."

The pressures, innocent and deliberate, were really piling

► *Saturday, June 25 and Sunday, June 26*

up on him, and now, out of the corner of his eye, he saw three more Dreyer supporters bearing down on him. He braced himself.

*Yale '51. Tennis team. Charming couple. Want to buy a boat. Friends of the Commodore Emeritus.*

Three times he went through the drill and, each time a little more curtly, gave his stock answer.

*Admissions is expediting things as fast as we can.*

God! Once more, and I'll find Peabottom and spit in his eye.

Three other friends buttonholed him, but when there was no mention of the Dreyers, he started to relax. Instead, with suspicious solicitude, they asked about Jean's health and from their expressions they obviously didn't quite believe his explanation that she felt a little seedy and was resting at her mother's.

By the time he reached the courts, Al was in high bad humor, and the mixed doubles game on the all-weather court did nothing to improve it.

The Lings, Paul and Joyce, were playing with Helen and Joe Dreyer. Joyce was pale, angular, and as uncharming as her husband. Every time Al saw her, he thought, So young to be a bitch. Helen was a refreshing contrast, her tanned olive skin standing out warmly against the white tennis dress that she filled more than adequately and yet not revealingly.

But the players weren't the game. At the candidates' interview, Paul Ling couldn't have overlooked Dreyer's cavalier dismissal of Jack Lyons. Today was a ploy to rehabilitate Dreyer with the tennis crowd.

With Joyce as his partner, Joe was playing against Helen and Ling, and, though Al didn't know much about tennis, he could tell that Dreyer was a showoff. He poached shots that were properly Joyce's returns, he crowded the net more than he should have, and he concentrated his smashes at poor Helen. Which was good strategy in that unbalanced game, mixed doubles, which puts strong-weak against strong-weak. But it was rough on Helen, and Al didn't think it the highest

gallantry for a man to make himself look good at the expense of his wife.

Nonetheless, from the applause, Dreyer was winning the respect of the tennis crowd. His clever supporters were too much for Al, he decided; he was surrounded. Might as well retire to the Cellar and start drinking.

Just as he turned away, Helen, at the net, ducked a smash that Dreyer had aimed at her. Her ankle twisted, and she went down. Al could hear her suppressed cry of pain.

Instinctively, he wanted to help, but by the time he got through the wire gate, she had hobbled off the court with Paul's help and was sitting on a wooden bench, rubbing the ankle.

More casually, as though they were annoyed by the interruption of the game, Dreyer and Joyce joined them from the other side of the net.

"Sorry, Helen," Joe said in an unconcerned voice. "But I can't pull my stroke, you know. Why I never liked mixed doubles in the first place."

"I'll get a bucket of ice water," Al said.

"Please don't bother, Mr. Babcock. It isn't bad. Just a little turn. I don't want to be any trouble."

"Nonsense!"

Before he realized that he was saying it, Al blurted an invitation. "Look, if you can make it, let's go over to the Mall. I'll get the ice water. I insist! I think you need a drink, too."

She smiled and turned apologetically to her husband. "If you don't mind, Joe? I'm sorry to break up the game. But I just don't feel up to it any more."

Racquet in hand, strutting like a model, stomach held in and breasts thrust out, Margie appeared out of nowhere. As usual, her tennis skirt was unnecessarily short, her blouse too tight. "Tennis, anyone? Need a substitute?"

Paul Ling bowed. Margie joined him, and Dreyer followed Joyce to the far court without another glance back toward Helen. The game resumed.

Slowly, his arm around her waist, Al helped Helen toward

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one of the little cocktail tables, calling to a beach boy to fetch a bucket of ice water. He got the drinks and sat down beside her. "How does it feel?"

"Better, I think. But it's awfully cold!"

"Maybe you ought to keep it up for a while."

Gently, he lifted the leg onto a chair, the contact giving him an unexpected little thrill. He felt guilty, but he couldn't help thinking, God, this woman has real sex appeal and doesn't even know it. Probably that bastard of a husband is always knocking her down.

For a while, they chatted aimlessly about tennis and the Club, and Helen felt a twinge of guilt, too. In spite of herself, she contrasted this man who seemed to enjoy talking to her with her husband. Joe was basically contemptuous of women. Al—no, he was still Mr. Babcock—really listened and apparently respected her opinions. It was a delightful change.

And yet underneath, she sensed, there was a tension, an unhappiness about something, and her womanly curiosity was aroused. She asked about his family.

The question made Al realize that he had thought of them scarcely once since arriving at the Club. I'll phone tomorrow, he told his conscience.

"I know you've met Jean. Then there's Liz and Dick. Not much to be said about them. Liz is just a gangling teenager at the bursting-out age, with orthodontic and boy problems. Dick—well, what is there to say about the all-American boy? He is planning at the moment to be a nuclear physicist, a U-2 pilot, or maybe a Peace Corps volunteer in Darkest Africa."

In the contrary way of boys, Al went on, Dick wanted no part of the insurance business or the United States Navy, in either of which pursuits Al might be able to help him.

"But he's just a boy," Helen protested.

"I know. I don't really mind. He's trying to become a man on his own two feet. But I'm disappointed about one thing. Like most of these power-crazy kids today, he doesn't give a damn about sailing. He wouldn't even go out in the Blue Jay if Jean didn't insist."

Hell, he thought, here I am babbling like Nick Carnes.

"I talk too much," he apologized. "Tell me about your family."

The question was natural enough, Helen knew, and yet what was she going to tell him? In spite of his very proper Housatonic ways, he probably would understand and even sympathize, and she wished she could get it over with. Once and for all. But she had to consider Joe.

"There really isn't much to tell," she said carefully. "I have a brother who is a lawyer in Brooklyn. And my father, a retired businessman, lives on Long Island. My mother died a month ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

The condolence was more than polite.

"Thank you. We were very close, and I miss her. Now Dad wants to sell the house because it's too big, and that's about all there is to report."

Al sensed the withdrawal and wondered about it. "It would be nice to have your father join you."

"No. He probably will take a small apartment someplace."

She wasn't being deliberately mysterious the way flirtatious women often are, and she talked freely on other topics. But about her family, she was, well, guarded. That was the word.

The conversation shifted, and they had another drink. Al felt himself being drawn to this gentle woman who had the same trace of sadness that he remembered in his mother's eyes.

"You know, I *like* you!" he blurted, and immediately felt a bit foolish.

Helen put her head down in a mock gesture that could have been—but wasn't—coy. "Thank you, sir." Her tone added, And I like you, too. Al felt he ought to pull back before he made a fool of himself altogether.

"Well, here come the happy athletes," he said abruptly.

Flushed, panting a little, the Lings, Dreyer, and Margie joined them.

"And now, swimming, anyone?" Margie asked.

"No thanks," Paul replied. "If Helen's ankle is up to it,

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Joyce and I would like to have her and Joe meet a few friends."

"I can walk quite well," Helen said. "See? There's almost no swelling now, thanks to Al—Mr. Babcock."

"You've taken very good care of my wife," Dreyer drawled. "If there's a medical fee, send me the bill."

The tone was light, but Dreyer didn't banter as well as he smashed.

The group broke up, the Lings and Dreyers walking slowly toward the clubhouse, Margie heading for the women's lockers. Al wandered back to the courts to say hello to Jack Lyons, then to the Cellar for a drink.

But the Maguire wedding reception had reached its climax. Pat McDermott was roaring *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling* with a piercing tenor assist from the bride's father, and the noise was too much. Al went out to the pool.

When Margie spotted him she swam quickly to the ladder and clambered up. She hitched down her tight, brief red bathing suit. Like a man adjusting a jockstrap, Al thought.

"I've been waiting for the chance to get you alone, Al. About those Dreyers."

He swore. "I've taken just about all the pressure on that subject that I can!"

"You don't know what I'm going to tell you. It's very, very important."

"All right. Get it over with."

But now that she had this elusive man, Margie wasn't going to let him go. She was going to keep him as long as she could, and maybe restrike the fire that they once had known.

"I can't say anything here, Al. Buy me a drink, and we can talk alone over on the Mall."

She preceded him, and her round, firm fanny undulated invitingly. Al remembered the first lines of a very dirty doggerel.

*Oh, Mr. Gallagher, Oh, Mr. Gallagher—*

*Does a fair and broad behind force Pushkin from the mind?*

Mr. Gallagher's gallant answering tribute to Callipygia was unprintable.

Poor Margie!

Like a spayed bitch, she radiated surface warmth and comehither, but there was nothing deeper, none of the real, womanly sex that Helen Dreyer unconsciously possessed and, possessing, was not driven to pursue men. Margie wandered, hoping each new husband or lover could fill the emptiness, but they could only fill it physically; none had pierced her frigidity.

At the table, she dropped her big red beach bag on a chair and turned on Al without preamble. "I'm horrified! You know, of course, that I wrote for the Dreyers. Do you know the woman is *Jewish*?"

"No!"

"Oh, yes. And I can prove it."

She rummaged through the bag and found an envelope. "I happen to have a friend who lives on Long Island who sent me *this* from a local newspaper."

It was an obituary. Al read it.

"Mrs. Ethel Lang, wife of Max Lang, retired New York garment executive, died yesterday at Beth Zion Hospital after a short illness. In addition to her husband, she is survived by a son, Jack, an attorney in Brooklyn, and a daughter, Mrs. Helen Dreyer, of Housatonic, Conn. Services are being arranged for today."

It explained so much! The hesitancy, the anxiety, the pleading looks, the mysterious reserve, and Dreyer's condescension. Probably the heel threw it in Helen's face every night.

Margie was being disgustingly virtuous. "It's not, and you know it, Al, that I like gossip. Usually, people are gossiping about little me. But you are Admissions Chairman. You ought to know, oughtn't you?"

His reaction disappointed her. He just nodded absently. She pouted. "You don't seem pleased. The talk is that you've been holding them up. And isn't that why we post candidates?"

"Yes, Margie. Let me think a minute, will you?"

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He was trying to rescrumble the pieces, to find what this meant to him, what it meant to the Dreyer candidacy.

Margie went right on talking, her pique turning to anger. "And to think that insufferably self-righteous Peabottom—he represented my second husband in the divorce, you know—would try to slip over a *Jewess!*"

She shook her blonde head in outrage.

"Whatever will come next? Hadassah luncheons right here at Housatonic! That's what will come next."

Al squirmed. Like blackballing, like posting delinquents for their house charges, anti-Semitism was an aspect of club life that he preferred not to think about any more than necessary. It bothered him when he did think about it.

"We choose members for social congeniality, Margie. There's nothing in the constitution or the bylaws that bars membership on grounds of race or religion."

"Oh, come off it, Al. What *else* is Admissions for? Just tell me that."

"I'll tell you again. Our job is to find people who are compatible, who are morally and financially responsible."

"Fiddle-dee-dee! We start with a Jewish wife, then next a Jewish husband with a Christian wife. Then before you know it we take a Jewish *couple*. And, some day, the way they *push*, it will be Commodore Ginsberg of Housatonic. Won't *that* be gay and social and compatible!"

Al remembered what Mrs. Carmichael had said about mixed marriages. She'd been so right! He felt suddenly sad for Helen.

"Yes, Margie, you have something, from your point of view. Most club life seems to be built on fear, suspicion, hate, doesn't it? Not on love and trust."

Sometimes, she wondered why she was so attracted to this man. Al could go off on the strangest tangents that didn't make sense. Maybe that was one reason she did like him so much. She'd never gotten to understand him well enough to anticipate his reactions, and it was a challenge to keep up with his suddenly changing moods.

"Whatever are you talking about, Al? You a little high?"



He giggled. It was always a warning signal that he was taking too much aboard. He ignored it. "Yes. And I propose to get much higher. Won't you join me, my dear?"

There it was again. First, moody and now, devil-may-care. This man could be so fascinating. She melted, pressing a damp leg against his knee.

"Oh, Al! It's like old times again. Just give me five minutes to slip into a dress."

It was almost half an hour, of course, before she reappeared in a yellow sheath. By then the Lings and Dreyers, still in their whites, had reserved a table at the secluded end of the dining room where boatmen and tennis players, too lazy or tired to change, were allowed to eat. They invited Margie and Al to join them.

As the hostess, Joyce Ling started to arrange the seating, but Margie immediately took over so that she could sit beside Al. All during the meal, the constant, inviting pressure of her leg against his embarrassed him, and he regretted his invitation. He felt sure that Helen knew what was going on.

*Où sont les neiges d'antan?* Wish to God I'd let her disappear, too, with the snows of yesteryear. Villon hadn't known when he was well off.

At first, Joyce was cool toward Margie for having scrambled her seating plans. Gradually she thawed as Margie directed the conversation to her, cattily discussing the women's tennis team, the new swimming instructor, and other private topics that excluded Helen.

Joyce's natural bitchiness responded, and poor Helen sat silently through most of the meal.

Once or twice, Al tried to talk to her, but Margie put a proprietary hand on his arm. "Come, Al. Tell the truth. Aren't you men just a little jealous over the swim coach? We girls think he's the handsomest."

Dreyer was no help to his wife. Mostly, he discussed a pending case with Paul. Al saw Helen wince when he remarked, tolerantly, that the steak was good, though a bit overdone, and he would have preferred a parfait if Housatonic served them.

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Then he joined the others in uproarious laughter when Margie told an anti-Semitic joke in a very bad Yiddish accent. Helen laughed, too, though there was the same quick, strained look that Al remembered in his mother's eyes when Uncle Ben told jokes about the Irish.

Only once did Margie directly address Helen, and then it was a long feminine needle for Al's benefit.

"You have such a beautiful tan!" she gushed. "But, of course, it must be easy with your *olive* skin."

"Thank you, Mrs. Winters. Joe, I'm sorry if I seem to be breaking up two events in one day. But I am getting a little cold, and don't you think we've imposed quite long enough on the hospitality of the Lings?"

"Guess you're right, Helen. Joyce, Paul, thank you for a most pleasant day. Mrs. Winters, Al, it was a pleasure."

Joyce pointedly made no effort to prolong the dinner.

"Paul, we'd better go, too. I'm simply exhausted from the tennis. Good night, all."

After the others had left, Al and Margie ordered another drink at the table, and while she chattered, he thought about Helen.

Damn the woman! Why did she have to be Jewish, anyhow?

In the good old days, that would have been enough to swing the boom on the Dreyer candidacy. But strange new winds blew today. What with the noisy little liberal element in the Club and the Irish, too, her Jewishness just might help get Dreyer in.

Al laughed bitterly.

"What's funny, Al? Did I say something?"

"It's a bad joke. I don't think you'd get it."

He, Al Babcock, liked Helen, liked her a lot, and was only trying to keep out her Protestant, no-good husband. But when crafty old Peabottom got to work, Al would be tabbed anti-Semitic. That would louse him up with the Irish Group, as well as the liberals. Not that the Irish loved Jews, but they feared more any form of Protestant *anti*. And once you became "controversial" at Housatonic, you'd had it.

There was only one thing to do, and he did it splendidly. With Margie, he sat drinking at the table until the unnecessarily loud scraping of chairs and rattling of silverware pointedly reminded them that the dining room was closing.

With the little bitch still trotting at his side, Al moved on to the Cellar, and they closed that, too.

Margie was getting worried about him. "You need something to eat, Al, you've been drinking so much. I have a wonderful cold turkey home."

Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "But we mustn't be seen leaving together. I'll go to the powder room and then drive home in my car. You'll follow, won't you? And drive carefully?"

Why not, Al thought in drunken self-pity.

He was disgusted with Helen, even though it wasn't her fault, and with Jean, and it *was* her fault, and with Peabottom and the whole damned Club. It would serve all of them right, the bitches and bastards, if he wound up in bed with Margie.

"I'll be there," he promised.

The babysitter, who conveniently lived next door to Margie, was just leaving when Al arrived, and he had the sense to drive around the block once so she wouldn't see him.

Margie was waiting at the door.

Without a word, she threw her arms around the small of his back, the sharp nails digging into him. Her sudden ferocity dismayed him. He giggled.

"It isn't funny. God, Al! I want you to make love to me—hard!"

Her belly pushed up against him in a slow, rolling motion, and her right hand slid around front and between his thighs. Her tongue flicked in and out between his teeth. All at once, belly, hand, mouth, she was writhing, squeezing, licking, panting. He staggered back toward the sofa.

"No! The damned picture window. People can see. The kitchen!"

They stumbled into the kitchen, and Al slumped down onto a tubular modern chair with almost no seat or back.

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There was only the reflected light from the living room, and in the gloom Margie peeled off her dress and slip. Then she slipped out of her panties. Except for a bra, she was naked, and the light caught her slightly protuberant belly, accentuating the darker triangular patch below.

Slowly, deliberately, she stalked toward him, then frenziedly unhooked his belt and yanked at his zipper. "Get up!"

As he lifted himself, she yanked off his trousers, pushed him roughly down again, and mounted him. "Al! Al! Hard! Hard!"

Awkwardly, almost numbly at first, he responded.

The back of the chair cut into his shoulders, her weight made him ache in the small of his back.

"Al, this is so wonderful!"

Her rhythmic motions had an insistent, ever-faster tempo, and her breath came faster. He felt himself responding with short, spasmodic movements that gradually became deep thrusts. His hands dug into her round buttocks. His mouth sucked hers.

"All"

With a final convulsive gesture, she squeezed against him, then slumped and slid down to the floor. With writhing, animal sounds, she crawled back toward him and bit so deeply into his calf that he swore.

She moaned and was silent.

Disgusted yet satisfied, Al retrieved their clothing, draped them over one arm, and with some difficulty got her back to her feet. "Come on! You're going to bed."

Slowly, he walked her upstairs and dropped her on her bed. The little night light silhouetted her and, half-opening her eyes, she wriggled invitingly.

He wasn't interested. Roughly, he pulled the covers up over her and draped her clothing on a chair. He got back into his pants and went home.

Next morning he slept late, then brooded about calling the family as he had promised himself. He couldn't bring himself to do it. He felt too ashamed.

JUNE
TUESDAY
28

Like most summer clubs, Housatonic closed on Mondays so that everyone, including the help, could recuperate from the weekend. Beginning Tuesdays, all the activities, days and evenings, sports and social, gradually stepped up in intensity to another weekend explosion of fun and games.

Tonight, Al figured, the place would be so quiet that he could hold his Admissions meeting in the Cellar. But when he arrived, the parking lot was already filled, and he had to leave his car out on the street. From the Club dining room, he heard the jarring music of Housatonic High's Hot Jazz Combo, whose enthusiasm and below-union rates got them more engagements than their musicianship warranted. Must be one of those damned outside parties.

In the parking lot, a girl was giggling. "Now, Joe, stop it! Look what you've done to my hair." The man's voice was slurred.

Al could visualize the scene without straining his imagination. I wonder, he thought crudely, if the Department of Health, Education and Welfare or the Census Bureau or whoever worries about such things has ever estimated the impact of outside parties on the national birth rate.

The clubhouse itself was jumping with activity, and Al had to thread his way through dozens of strikingly undistinguished-looking men and their overdressed companions. Most of them wore saucer-sized identification badges which read

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"Silliman's Department Store," with the wearer's name and department—Warehouse, Shipping, Junior Miss—added in big red crayon.

In the imperative of Club economics, outside affairs were a necessary source of revenue. The Club made a modest profit on each meal, and the bar gross brought tears of ecstasy to the eyes of the Treasurer and House Chairman. The only alternatives would be a dues hike or higher food and bar prices, either of which Housatonic's membership would resist to the verge of resignation. But Al despised the damned things.

For their one big free night of the year on the boss, the merry-makers took over Housatonic, nosing curiously through all the rooms, stealing Club matchbooks and HY&TC-monogrammed spoons as souvenirs, wandering in their shoes and high heels across the tennis courts. Actually, it wasn't the breakage that bothered Al. It was the intrusion, the rape of Housatonic's privacy.

Somehow, when he went to Housatonic Hotel and found some of the public rooms roped off for private functions, he never gave it a thought, but in his own Club, it was different. Suddenly, he was overwhelmed by strangers taking *his* property, staring at him, making him feel that *he* was the outsider. Damned trippers!

In the Cellar, they lined the bar, talking loudly, occasionally tipping over glasses, generally cutting up in the juvenile way of the nondrinker on his night out. Among them there was, inevitably, the last of the big champagne buyers, imperiously ordering poor Mike about as he squandered his week's take-home pay in buying drinks for the house.

Al found the rest of Admissions sitting glumly in a far corner.

"Where's your badge?" Pat McDermott greeted him.

Al shrugged resignedly. "Sorry, fellows, I'd forgotten about the Silliman blast."

"We can't talk here," Nick Carnes said petulantly. "How about the board room?"

"O.K. Treasurer and House Chairman notwithstanding, if

any of our visitors have taken over there, we'll just kick them the hell out."

The board room was deserted, but the alien wave had left its debris behind. Empty glasses were making water rings on the lovely conference table. Ash trays overflowed onto the carpet, and there was a naked spot on the wall where a burgee had been stolen.

Jon Winston grimaced. "Honestly, Al, if Silliman weren't the richest member of this Club, if he hadn't done so much for Housatonic, I'd move at the next board meeting to bar his parties. Such dreadful people!"

"Oh, come on, Jon," Pat said. "It's their one big night to kick up their heels and rub elbows with the rich. At least they think we're rich. Let them have their fun."

Jack Lyons chuckled maliciously. "And don't get Silliman any more upset than he already is. That brat of a son of his, who is such a pest on the courts, finally got his just desserts, to coin a phrase. The new swimming coach persuaded Junior Activities to suspend him for two weeks. Diving off the high board when small kids were in the pool."

"Good!" growled Ed Abernathy. "Even if it means we start looking for another coach next season."

"And a new Junior Activities chairman," added Nick Carnes. "Silliman is a hard man about his family. I tangled with him once over that brat, and lost, naturally, when I handled Junior Sailing."

"Let's come to order," Al said impatiently, "and get back to Admissions' own problems."

"We're waiting to hear from you," Jon said. "You were checking out the non-Club references on Dreyer and waiting for the ten-day posting. What's the report?"

Al was silent a moment. He had been impaled on the horns of that fabulous cliché monster, the dilemma. He knew Dreyer just didn't belong in Housatonic and he wished his committee would take his word for it, but these strong-minded characters would probably demand to know more. Yet how much could he say about his conversation with Jones and not betray the old gentleman's confidence?

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"Let's take the references first. To me, they say nothing, and that is everything. Read them for yourselves. Then let me say something in the strictest privacy of these four walls. And I mean *these four walls*."

There was silence as each committeeman scanned the letters, then passed the sheaf to the man on his right.

Jon read them with particular care. "Quite in order," he pronounced. "In fact, good references."

The others murmured agreement, even those who had been opposed to Dreyer. Al felt on the defensive.

"I'm surprised, gentlemen, that one thing seems to have escaped you. The lack of enthusiasm, the almost curt phraseology. This is the best that the man's own friends can say about him!"

"You're being too subtle," Jon objected. "Or, perhaps, would prejudiced be the better word?"

Ed Abernathy nodded reluctantly. "This time, I have to go along with Jon. But what's the 'strictest privacy' teaser you just threw out?"

"Through one of these letters—and I am bound on my word as a gentleman not to reveal even to you which one—I developed a rather nasty lead on Dreyer. He is, or was, what my Dad used to call a chippy chaser. In plain words, a whoremaster."

Pat McDermott was shocked. "That's a terrible thing to say about a man! Even with proof. Do you have any?"

"I have confidence in my source."

Nick Carnes quickly picked him up. "One source? That source could be prejudiced, you know. Especially if he won't stand up like a man and be identified."

Pat nodded emphatically. "I don't like the man, but this is just scandal."

Jon looked placatingly toward Al. "We've known each other since we were kids. I want to say something. And I *don't* want you to misinterpret it and get insulted. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough."

"The rest of this committee is being put in a position where



we have to take your word alone on a very serious accusation. I don't doubt your word! But you could be wrong, Al. And you put us in a ridiculous light with Executive. We have to say that Al Babcock heard something nasty, he can't tell us where or how, but we go along blindly."

Again, there were murmurs of agreement.

"Al, I put it to this committee that unless, somehow, you can get independent corroboration for the charge, we must dismiss it, in all fairness to Dreyer."

"I've arranged to do that," Al said. "But apparently it hasn't come through."

Jon's eyes lighted in sudden comprehension. "Now I understand! For you to do this to me!"

"Now it's my turn to say that we've known each other since we were kids, and I don't want you to get your bowels in an uproar. I told you before, I didn't do it purposely. The ball just bounced that way."

"What in God's name is all this mysterious private talk?" demanded Abernathy.

"Give me time, Ed," Al pleaded. "Two or three days maybe; I don't think it will be longer."

"All right. But I'm the kind of guy who skips to the end to see how the book comes out. You're making me pretty curious about what the hell is going on in my own committee."

"If I'm not being too nosy," Nick asked, "did the posting produce any objections?"

This was the question Al had dreaded. He couldn't take a pocket veto on what Margie had told him, but it seemed such a treacherous thing to do to poor Helen. Last Saturday night he had betrayed his wife, now he was betraying this innocent woman who liked and trusted him.

Quite a wholesome, inspirational character, this Al Babcock; a model for his children. But if he didn't betray Helen, he would be betraying his own committeemen and thus the Club. They had the right to know every hard fact that he knew.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"What!"

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Jon Winston was amazed. "What possible objection? Who made it?"

"Again, I can't disclose the source. But, sadly, there is corroboration this time."

Silently he handed the obituary clipping about Helen's mother to Jon. As he read it, Jon's weak face hardened into anger. "Why, this means she's *Jewish!* All along, that maiden name bothered me, but with a supporter like Peabottom it didn't seem possible. He'll answer for this! Using *my* prestige, *my* position in this Club to support a woman like this!"

"Woman like *what?*" asked Lyons. "I happen to have some very good Jewish friends, and they don't carry plague germs. In fact, I like Jews."

Now there's the typical, stupid statement of a rich liberal, Al thought disgustedly. Jack didn't say he liked *Helen*; he said he liked Jews. All Jews, probably all Negroes, all minorities in one great big indiscriminate bear hug of brotherhood. In Al's book, this was a little better, but not much, than those people who *disliked* all Jews, all Negroes, all minorities.

Both camps were such doctrinaire horses' asses. Couldn't people just like *people* or, if they preferred, enjoy the old-fashioned luxury of disliking them without having to choose sides?

Jack stared challengingly. "Mr. Chairman, may I remind you in words you have often used that there is nothing in the constitution or the bylaws that bars membership in Housatonic on the grounds of race or religion?"

"Entirely correct, Jack."

"Then why did you even show us this clipping? Don't you believe what you say?"

Al flushed at the insolent tone but restrained himself.

Now it was starting, and he needed a cool head to fight it. Even Pat McDermott looked questioningly at him. He could hear the talk spreading. *Al Babcock is anti-Semitic, Al Babcock is anti-Semitic! Hates the Negroes and the Catholics, too. Down with Babcock! Down with Babcock!*

"I don't share Jack's sweeping pro-Semitic enthusiasms, gentlemen. But, for several reasons, I don't like injecting this

issue any more than you like receiving it. In the first place, I'm not an *anti*, in case anyone is trying to build a little box around me. Secondly, I consider Helen—Mrs. Dreyer—a most charming person."

"But you're willing to shoot at her if it hurts Dreyer. Or maybe, all along, you knew she was Jewish and just pretended that Dreyer was your target."

"Dammit, Jack, I don't have to take that!"

Pat McDermott put a restraining hand on Al's arm. "All Nobody doubts your good faith."

His big honest face was clouded. As a family man and a strait-laced one at that, he felt only contempt for a lecher. And he had that houseful of nice, innocent daughters to think about, too. But nothing had been proved and in his indestructible naïveté he believed that most of the bad things that were said about people were just talk. Nothing more.

"I'm very sorry about both issues that were presented tonight," he said slowly. "I think they're—well, dirty." He paused. "Besides, that Dreyer woman is an awfully nice person, and a good Irish Catholic, of all people, shouldn't practice bigotry." He knew some of the things that were said behind his back about the Irish.

He slapped a heavy palm on the conference table. "I vote for the Dreyers."

"Your privilege, Pat."

Al's tone was curt. He'd anticipated that Pat might react this way and he was only mildly exasperated with him, but he was still angry at Jack.

"Let me get back to what Jack said. I don't want any KKK robes being tailored for me. Jack seems to think that the State Commission Against Discrimination, or somebody, has given him the responsibility of reforming Housatonic whether Housatonic wants to be reformed or not. I don't buy that. I take the Club as I find it, and let's be frank, at least with each other. It isn't exactly crowded with Jew lovers."

Jon Winston assented vigorously. "You're so right, Al."

"Let me finish, Jon. Our job is to find congenial, compatible

► Tuesday, June 28

people. If enough members don't like Jews, I think that is definitely a factor for this committee to take into consideration. It's the members' Club, they have squatters' rights here."

He turned directly to Lyons. "And that was the reason I brought up this unpleasant issue. The only reason. I certainly don't pretend to love all Jews, but I happen to like this one very much as a person."

Jack's tone was somewhat less insolent. "Very eloquent—and unconvincing. Personally, I refuse to be nineteenth century in my thinking about racial and religious matters. After all, Housatonic does have electricity instead of gas these days. The members ought to be as modern as their utilities."

"I'll put you down with Pat for a Yes vote, Nick?"

As Peabottom's creature, Nick had to stay with the Dreyers, but for his own self-respect, he preferred to think he was supporting them as potential boating members.

"There's something rather special about the water people, you know. Sound. Substantial. Good sports. I simply have to dismiss these other objections. Can't believe this gossip about him. Won't hold her background against her."

"You and that blue-water mystique of yours!" Ed Abernathy erupted. "Let me tell you something about water people. When you're out in the middle of the Sound, being towed back by the Coast Guard at my expense as a taxpayer, where am I? Right in the Cellar. The only profit-making division of this whole silly Club."

"Now, Ed! That's unfair. Most unfair! Just because I went aground last year during the midsummer rendezvous. I was *not* towed back by the Coast Guard. I'd like to know who spread that story. I got myself off at the next tide."

Wearily, Al tapped his pencil for order.

"How do you stand, Ed?"

"Oh, I don't really hold the boating business against them. I like the lady, too. But I do resent Jack's liberal strong-arming. That if we vote down her *husband*, we're anti-Semitic. The hell with that phony argument!"

He paused and shook his head in troubled fashion. "But, frankly, Al, I don't like all that hocus-pocus, that maybe

Dreyer once chased girls. Who didn't? And besides, where's the proof?"

He grinned at Jon and Pat.

"Now, as the two most prominent churchmen on this committee, please don't suck wind that what I say is blasphemous. I really feel it. I'm a Christian in a mild way only on account of one guy. Thomas. As you remember, when Christ came back from the dead, old Thomas kept his head. He put his hand in the wounds to make sure that it really was Jesus. He was a scientific, inquiring skeptic. A lot of people have held that against him, but, except for him, I probably would have felt that a group of excited Hebes were sharing a mass hallucination."

"Dammit, Ed, that *is* blasphemy! And nothing to do with what we're talking about."

"I was afraid you'd come out swinging, Pat. But what I say is relevant. On account of Thomas, my patron saint, I'm on your side. I'll vote against Dreyer only if Al comes through with definite corroboration. And no offense to you personally, Al."

"Jon, you have already expressed yourself somewhat heatedly. I can put you down for a negative?"

"Definitely! But I thoroughly agree with Pat about Ed."

"Oh, fellows, let's at least keep theology out of this discussion!"

"All right, Al. But the way I feel right now, I don't mind letting the rest of the committee know all about our little mystery. Gentlemen, an old friend of my family is to fill me in on Mr. Dreyer's recent bed antics, if any. I will be delighted to report back."

"The way I tally it," Al said, "Jack, Nick, and Pat vote favorably. Ed is neutral, pending the corroboration, as I guess I am."

He looked around the table. They nodded.

"Well, it's obvious that this mixed-up committee still can't make up its unanimous mind. I will so report to Executive. Any contrary opinions?"

There was silence.

► *Monday, July 4/Independence Day*

"We stand adjourned."

He opened the door, and the roar of Silliman's party, now in jumping full swing, overwhelmed them.

"God! With these mercifully thick old walls and doors, I'd forgotten. Come, gentlemen. We must run the gauntlet of Housatonic's average man."

Al couldn't resist a parting shot.

"Largely Christian, too, as you'll notice."

► *Chapter Nine*

JULY
MONDAY
4
Independence Day

With all the meets and contests during the day, the fireworks scheduled for after dark, the special \$4.25 Family Dinner (children under twelve \$2.50), Housatonic's dining room did a sellout business every Fourth.

Tonight almost everybody, and especially the bargain hunters, those members who were cheap or financially harassed, had turned out in force, their kids with them.

The waiters moved as quickly as they could between the tables so closely crowded that the chairs were almost back to back, but service was inevitably slow. Despite shushings by embarrassed parents, the children, tired from the long day, nagged fretfully for milk or Pepsi as they waited impatiently for dinner.

Here and there were oases of comparative adult silence. At one table, Dr. McDonald was entertaining the Carmichaels,

conscientiously carrying on the duties of a sponsor to make his protégés feel at home, to get them properly presented to the Old Guard of Housatonic. In the Club's coiled nautilus shell of status, the good doctor would safely guide them to the warm, innermost chamber, and they would *belong*.

At another table, not quite so decorously, Ed Condon was entertaining a party of friends or prospects, but the Johnstones with the "e" on the end of their name, poor, naïve people, weren't among them. Having closed the sale on their new house, Ed had abandoned them.

Soon they would learn that getting into a club, important as that was, represented only the first step. They had been approved, but they were far from being accepted.

Without chaperonage, they would have to make their own way, their own friends: a slow, stumbling, and never completely successful process. Unlike the Carmichaels, they would not penetrate to the ultimate chamber; they would penetrate only deeply enough to realize that there were still chambers beyond and feel grateful for nodding recognition from the mysterious denizens who lived there.

Al had declined several invitations to join parties because he had to map out defensive strategy for his set-to a few hours later with Executive. Peabottom confidently expected a final, favorable report on the Dreyers, and he could only report further delays. It was going to be sticky, very sticky.

Sitting alone at a small, corner table, he felt a little sorry for himself. He must have sprained a muscle waddling around on those damned stilts. There was a dull ache in his right calf. He even envied the harassed domesticity all about him and felt a twinge of loneliness that Liz and Dick—and Jean, for that matter—weren't here with him.

Across almost the length of the dining room, he saw that Margie was trying to catch his attention, but he carefully avoided her proprietary eye. This weekend, to avoid any possible repetition of the previous Saturday's disaster, he had resolutely stayed away from the Club. And tonight, when he had so many other problems, he wasn't going to let her trip and throw him again.

► *Monday, July 4/Independence Day*

After dinner, he ordered a drink at his table, which was a mistake, because she trapped him. With a schoolmarm's unbreakable grip on his arm, she steered him outside to watch the fireworks with her. Folding chairs had been placed on the Mall, but Al preferred to watch from the porch. They could see just as well, and there was less chance that they would be seen together.

Having put in four wartime years with the Navy, he could not respond with a civilian's ferocious, star-spangled patriotism to the thunderous barrages and the rank, pungent smell of powder. They were all too uncomfortably reminiscent of sounds and sights and smells that he wanted to close out of his mind.

But like the nostalgia he had felt earlier in the day, the spectacle—so old! so familiar!—deeply moved him.

The spark-spitting pinwheels . . . the dazzling set pieces that leaped into fiery design . . . the pyrotechnical grace notes from private parties on the boats in the harbor . . . the intermittent flashes in the dark sky that reflected far-off celebrations by other clubs . . . the wails of the smaller children terrified by the noise and the *aaahs* and *ooohs* of ten-year-old boys lost in an ecstasy that only sex some day would transcend . . . the studied squeals of the teenage girls.

Margie nudged him and laughed.

Their gangling escorts were seizing the opportunity to put a comforting arm around the girl's waists.

"Remember, Al? Things don't change, do they?"

He felt embarrassed. He must have been an impossible twerp. Why did she remind him?

At last, as the uniformed fireman moved closer with his hoseline in case of trouble, the fireworks man darted to the wooden framework that held the rockets. Quickly, with splendid wastefulness, he touched them off, one right after another, with his long torch, and the whole sky thundered.

There was, Al suddenly thought, something deeper in this gaudy extravaganza that ripped and stained the heavens than the blinding lights, the deafening noise that so charmed the young.



The rockets' flight was a symbol of life itself: the first furious upthrust of youth and the explosion into maturity, then the moment of serene suspension that must be middle age—a serenity which Al had not yet achieved—and finally the slow descent of age, the last fitful flicker of a dying spark. Then darkness.

"Al!"

Margie was annoyed.

"You haven't said a word in five minutes. I'm getting worried. What are these silences you seem to go into lately? Is it Jean?"

He avoided an answer. "Sorry, Margie."

"Well, buy me a drink, and I'll forgive you."

"Oh-oh. It's almost ten. I can't. Executive has summoned me. I'll have to leave you."

"Later then? I don't have any special plans for tonight, and you know, Al, for you there's always a light in the window."

"Afraid not, Sorry. This will be a long meeting."

"Beast!"

When Al knocked, then opened the thick door of the board room, the old clock was chiming four bells. Immediately inside, he sensed the tension.

Ted McDonald was reading figures from a batch of worksheets. Coat off, tie loosened, shirt unbuttoned at the collar, a sight Al had never seen, Peabottom was copying as Ted read.

In addition to Ted and the Commodore Emeritus, Exec included Commodore Archer; Joe Amory, Al's predecessor as Admissions Chairman, and crusty, wealthy Henry Silliman. All were present except Silliman.

Will Archer, paler than usual, didn't notice Al's entrance. Amory, his wind-beaten face lost in thought, only nodded.

"Sit down, boy," Peabottom said absently. "You're a director. You've got the right to hear the bad news. One of the privileges of high office is to start worrying before the general membership does."

He turned to Ted. "Go ahead with the figures. We'll get back to Al in a few minutes."

► *Monday, July 4/Independence Day*

"I've given you the assets—cash, accounts receivable, inventories, so forth."

Peabottom did some scribbling as Ted went on in the precise monotone of the accountant.

"Our cash position is bad—especially in relation to accounts receivable. Even if they're posted, some of those fellows won't pay up for months. Once the whisky is drunk and the fun's over, paying Club tabs seems an outrageous imposition. Like the doctor's bills after the crisis has passed."

"Or an attorney's fee after he has kept the client out of jail," Peabottom added. "Matter of personal experience."

"Quite right, sir," Ted agreed. "Now, I've already gone over the liabilities picture—the loss on operations, the expenditures for rehabilitation, our situation with the bank. There is, however, one five-hundred-dollar item which we accountants call a 'float.' That is, considered one way, it can be entered as an asset. Considered another way, it's a debit."

"Fellow must be drunk," Amory whispered to Al.

"Make up your mind and put it in either column," Peabottom said impatiently. "Five hundred more or five hundred less doesn't change our basic position. Plain fact, gentlemen, Housatonic is broke. And County National has indicated that it may change its mind about renewing our loan."

He glanced witheringly at Archer, and his voice was contemptuous. "And that isn't all the good news, gentlemen."

He twisted around heavily to rummage in the breast pocket of his jacket hanging on the chair behind him and finally extracted his handkerchief. He blew one call to arms. "Will, here, has reneged on his agreement to sign as guarantor."

Al and the other members of Exec were shocked. This could be disastrous.

"My wife," Will said lamely. "It's so much money! Fifty thousand. She just wouldn't let me."

"You've let me down, Will," Peabottom said.

It was a dismissal, a dishonorable discharge. At the next meeting of Nominating, poor Will would be stripped of his braid, his Commodore's pennant, all the little trappings of his office.

"I wouldn't have minded quite so much, Will, if it weren't at this particular time, Hemming and hawing and then reneging just when we need fast action, before County National fully wakes up to our worsening situation!"

"Commodore Peabottom?"

"Yes, Ted. You're a figures man. Have an idea?"

McDonald's voice was bland, but the question was pointed.

"Why don't you agree to be the guarantor, sir?"

"A man of your stature in the community would be highly acceptable," Joe Amory put in.

"Now, why didn't I think of that?" Will Archer said, feebly defiant.

"After all, back when you were Commodore, you did sign, as I recall. In fact, you set the precedent."

Like Jove brushing a fly off his forehead, Peabottom dismissed the suggestion with a wave of his hand.

"You gentlemen forget something. When I was Commodore, I was not a director of County National. Today, I am."

"Wouldn't that facilitate things?" Will asked.

Peabottom rumbled on as though Will hadn't opened his mouth. "You see, gentlemen, by signing, I would place myself in the untenable position of serving two masters—the Club and the bank. Possibly legal. Ethically, quite impossible."

"There must be some answer!" Joe Amory said impatiently. "We've weathered other storms."

Peabottom nodded. "I think there may be. Quite frankly, but in all confidence, gentlemen, I am rather pleased that Henry Silliman was unable to attend tonight. As Ted has presented our situation, things look very bleak."

Peabottom was a veteran conspirator, and when he came to the sticky part of any business, there was no hint of furtiveness in his tone or expression. Instead, he raised his voice, and his countenance was reassuringly benign. Having thus set the stage for his little scene, to the effect that all was honest and aboveboard, he made his point.

"Perhaps I can present our predicament to Henry somewhat differently. Not misleadingly, of course. But a bit more

► Monday, July 4/Independence Day

encouragingly than it may seem offhand. I am hopeful that he will oblige as guarantor. Certainly County National would have no worry about *his* credit standing."

There were relieved murmurs. A little color came back into Will Archer's face, and he tried to reassume command of his ship. "Were you going to report on some candidates, Al?"

Again the Jovian wave of dismissal, and Peabottom took over the meeting. Will's cashiering had already started.

"Yes, sir," Al said.

He felt a bit like a heel as he addressed himself to Peabottom, ignoring Archer. "I would like to submit the name of Dr. Carmichael, who was proposed by Ted's father."

"Excellent," Peabottom said. "I've personally met the young man, and even though I understand he is toying with psychiatry, he seems basically sound. A gentleman. And a charming wife."

There really isn't much need for an Admissions Committee, Al thought irritably. We merely propose but Peabottom disposes, and Executive and the full Board go along with him.

"Accepted?" Peabottom's question was a command.

"Accepted," Executive dutifully murmured.

"We will so report to the Board. Continue, Al."

"I would also like to submit the Johnstones, proposed by Ed Condon."

Peabottom's tone was skeptical. "That used-car fellow? Haven't met him—or his wife. What's to be said for them? Except, I daresay, that Ed must have gotten a commission for selling them their house."

"Exactly, Commodore. I feel as you do about these business tie-ins with Club membership. But we found nothing other than that against the Johnstones."

An old Admissions chairman himself, Joe Amory usually had a few questions about the candidates. "And what did your committee find in favor of them? Do they sail? Are they social? Have they got money?"

"No. They don't know anything about the water and they certainly don't have the charm and polish of the Carmichaels."

And, from a little talk I had with Joe Delancey at the bank, I suspect Mr. Johnstone has hocked himself to the ears to get his business started."

Amory shook his head. "That's a lot of nothing, Al. Now one thing more. Don't tell me. From my own experience on Admissions, let me tell you. They have three or four small brats."

"Right."

"That type always does. No outside hobbies, I suspect. They don't belong in a club. They need a babysitter."

"I'd go along with you, Joe, if we had a comfortable waiting list. But we don't, and in view of our financial situation, Admissions found them . . . well, adequate. They won't get in anybody's hair."

Peabottom nodded resignedly.

"Accepting Admissions' reassurance on that score, we would find the initiation and dues money most welcome. Accepted?"

"Accepted," chorused Executive, in a follow-the-leader tone of resignation.

"And now, my good friends, the Dreyers?" Peabottom asked.

Except for the ticking of the old ship's clock and the soft rustling of paper as Ted McDonald put his worksheets into a manila folder, there was silence. Everyone in the room knew there had been trouble of some sort. They waited expectantly. This was one of the great pleasures of high Club office. You got the gossip first and most accurately.

"We're still checking, Commodore."

Peabottom didn't try to conceal his anger. "Will you kindly explain, sir?"

Al had decided beforehand that he would present his report in two sections. First, he would tell them about Helen. That was the part that bothered him personally, and he wanted to get it off his mind. But he had known it would be difficult to put into words. He didn't want to give Peabottom an opportunity to spread as gossip the whispers that kept nagging at his mind.

► Monday, July 4/Independence Day

*Al Babcock is anti-Semitic. . . . Al Babcock is anti-Semitic! Hates the Negroes and Catholics, too. Down with Babcock. Down with Babcock!*

He spoke slowly, carefully picking each word. "A fact has been brought to our attention by one of our own members that I feel I must report—report for what significance Executive may care to give it. Admissions has withheld judgment, feeling that important Club policy is involved, and, as you know, only Executive or a general membership meeting can set that."

Peabottom was eying him stonily, and Al looked directly back at the old terror.

"The lady, sir, is Jewish."

There was a guarded stir at the table. Someone's chair scraped, then everyone turned toward the Commodore Emeritus.

Al caught a momentary flash of amazement, which immediately disappeared in the deeply furrowed face. Peabottom was a scarred survivor of too many courtroom surprises to fluster. Again, there was the high-on-Olympus wave of dismissal. "I could have told you that innocent fact if I had realized you would consider it so important."

Of course he hadn't known; the amazed look had betrayed him. But he was too proud to admit it. He was furious that Dreyer had slipped in some way, but comeuppance there could wait. The important thing, his insistently logical mind told him, was that, having taken a stand, he must see it through to victory.

"Certainly I do not have to remind our Admissions Chairman, of all people, that Housatonic was one of the very first clubs to remove any references to race or religion from its constitution, bylaws, and membership application?"

The inference, as Peabottom had intended it to be, was plain. He could very easily begin laying the groundwork to prosecute a case of prejudice against Al Babcock.

"I am quite aware of that, sir. I favored it at the time."

"Then why do you raise this—this contemptible point now?"

Later, much later, when all the fuss had died down, smart young Mr. Dreyer would be quietly eased out of Peabottom, Hardy & Ling, and then there should be ways to persuade him to move to another town. But that could best be achieved only by accepting him now. He hoped, he really did, that he had scared Al back into line, with no great harm having been done.

Al stood his ground.

Considering what he personally thought of Helen and couldn't say to these men with their blank, expressionless faces, it was damned, exasperatingly unfair!

"I can only repeat that Admissions is reporting a fact for whatever significance *Executive* cares to give it. I'm not saying that it should influence you, only that you should know."

"And if we reject, quite properly, what I can characterize only as an item of prejudice?"

"Then Executive will be setting Club policy, which is the duty expected of you. I know our membership well enough to know there could be hell to pay over this. I'm trying to protect Admissions. We're not going to hold the bag, to be told later that we withheld information."

"Hell to pay? Hold the bag? You overdramatize, sir. And since there is nothing in the documents of Housatonic relating to the issue, no Club policy is involved. I move, gentlemen, that we strike the matter from any further consideration."

"Aye," Executive voted.

"And from the minutes, as well," he added.

"Aye."

Al felt both relieved and angry. He was relieved that he had reported Helen's Jewishness, as he had felt in all conscience he had to, and that it was not being held against her. He was angry at the hypocrisy of old Peabottom, who still couldn't fully accept those of his fellow Christians who attended a church with the cross on its steeple, and yet had manipulated Executive with the steamroller of Tolerance.

Peabottom enjoyed Al's frustration and relaxed, carelessly violating the first rule of cross-examination: never ask a question unless you already know the answer.

► Monday, July 4/Independence Day

"And now, as to Mr. Dreyer, Al." He affected a tone of good-natured sarcasm that brought obedient laughter from the committeemen. "Is he Eurasian, Melanesian—or perhaps a Hottentot?"

"Frankly, sir, we have received certain disquieting information."

This time, Peabottom's nasal blast was a command to cease and desist. He didn't know what Al was planning to say, but—having just taken one shock—Executive wouldn't relish another. He, Peabottom, had stupidly opened a door, and the only way to slam it shut again would be to make a hasty move for adjournment.

"Time is running on. I would imagine this—information is no more relevant than your earlier statements, and I move we dispense with it."

Again, Al stood his ground. Peabottom was old, authoritarian, and proud—and he remembered what he had been thinking earlier in the day, looking down from his stilts upon the waddling, self-important little man. Old men sometimes use very bad judgment and then are too stubborn ever to admit it, and that description fits our Commodore Emeritus to a T.

"The information may not be *legally* acceptable, sir, but I think it is sufficiently suggestive to be heard by this committee."

Quickly, before Peabottom could intervene, he gave Executive a rundown on Dreyer's allegedly lecherous past. His case was weak and the inferences premature, because he couldn't betray old Mr. Jones's confidence, nor could he report yet on Dreyer's current antics. But he wanted it on the record.

Peabottom made the most of his opponent's weaknesses. This boy just didn't seem to learn, and he, Peabottom, would have to start to bear down on him. Really bear down.

"If I may appear for the defense, gentlemen, I move dismissal on the grounds that the indictment is faulty. Loosely drawn. Vague allegations, yes, but no overt acts have been set forth."



"You understand, sir—I must protect my source."

"Quite admirable. Except that your caution works to the serious disadvantage of my client. However, I will proceed. These vaguely alleged, unsubstantiated acts supposedly took place before the time of the defendant's marriage?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, come now! We're all men of the world. Right here in this Club, almost within the week, in the case, or cases, of married men . . . Well, why particularize?"

In spite of himself, Al blushed. Maybe it was his imagination, but he thought the committeemen were looking at him in amusement.

Al expected Peabottom would attempt to cross-examine him about Dreyer's present conduct, but it seemed the Commodore Emeritus wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. He merely threw up his hands in a gesture of dismissal.

Al couldn't let it go at that. "I am empowered to report, sir, that Admissions is hopelessly divided at the moment."

Then he threw down the challenge, one that he felt Peabottom would have to back away from. "Would Executive, sir, care to take over the case without a firm recommendation from Admissions and act before pending inquiries are resolved?"

"Oh, no you don't!" Peabottom said. "You *are* Admissions. And, Al—I am still relying on you. Kindly make your report at the next full board meeting. I find it highly inconsistent that you gave full support to that used-car nonentity and yet you act so peculiarly about my own colleague. In view of all that has been said here tonight, I hope nothing more than inconsistency is involved."

The old man's face lighted with a sly, leering, triumphant expression that made Peabottom look not so much like Jove as like one of the lesser, more decadent gods.

"Why, I'd almost forgotten! Henry Silliman is one of the Dreyer supporters. You know, of course, about that stupid mistake, about suspending his son? Now, when I approach him about being guarantor for the bank, he will naturally ask about the Dreyers. What shall I say, Al?"

► *Wednesday, July 6*

"That Admissions is reviewing their application as fast as possible."

"Not very good, Al. He may come back and ask exactly what the hell he is getting for his fifty thousand dollars."

"I see your point, sir."

Peabottom's voice was sharp. "This delay is highly embarrassing! Not only to me personally but, more important, so far as the Club itself is concerned. You understand, Al?"

"Yes, sir. We will do our damndest."

Their stares locked. The game, finally, was up for grabs.

Al's glance touched the mahogany machine, an elaborately carved anachronism out of the past that reposed beside the ship's clock on the mantelpiece behind Peabottom. Slowly, a reckless plan began forming in his mind.

The machine was never talked about, not even among the directors, and it was rarely, rarely used. But it did come down off the mantelpiece, and what happened thereafter was whispered about at Housatonic for years.

► *Chapter Ten*

JULY
WEDNESDAY
6

To his friends and relatives, the summer bachelor is a target of good, clean, but very tired fun; he inspires jokes about the messy living room and the stacked-up, dirty dishes. Such heavy gaiety had never seemed particularly funny to Al, and

tonight, as he paced the big, empty, quiet house, bored, restless, alone, the alleged humor of his plight totally escaped him.

There was one thing he'd have to do, sooner or later, during the evening, but he kept stalling. Three times he lifted and then laid down the receiver of that dreadful, guilt-producing communications instrument so thoughtlessly visited on mankind by A. Graham Bell.

Only about as far back as his grandfather's day, men had been snugly immured in their own homes of nights, secure from the distraction of giving or receiving communications. If an emergency arose, you walked, ran, or sent a note by messenger to the nearest neighbor. Which nicely reduced communications—big, pompous modern word for what was mostly gossip and trivia—to manageable proportions.

But now!

Matters that in the old days would have merited only a short, simple note or no note at all now took on false importance because the phone was right at hand, silently reproaching you, telling you that all the facilities of the Bell System were at your service to carry your message, however unimportant. In Jean, especially, the phone inspired guilty, fretful imperatives.

"I *must* call Sally!" After saying which she would find something else to do first, her mind, however, remaining distracted.

"I *have* to talk to somebody about what to wear Saturday night." And then waste half an hour deciding whom to dial.

"I *should* call the hospital to see how Joan is." And not make the call at all.

Had she lived in the old days, she would have had to discipline herself, learn to put a few coherent sentences, one after another, on paper. Writing would have cut her really necessary communications by half and would undoubtedly have eliminated her guilt feelings about the rest.

Al himself was just as bad. He could have written, even dictated, a letter to the family and gotten it over with. But he hadn't, trusting that the reproachful phone would

► Wednesday, July 6

eventually nag him into doing his duty. Now, like Jean, he stalled, talking to himself.

"I *should* call them. I *must* talk to Jean about the mail. I've got to show some decent fatherly interest in Liz and Dick."

Finally, after he had wasted as much time as it would have taken him to write a letter, he mechanically dialed the number of his mother-in-law.

"Hello?" As always, Jean's voice was deceptively pleasant when she thought she was talking to a stranger.

"Hello, Jean!"

"Oh."

"Yes, it's me—I—your husband. How are you?"

"You really care?"

"Of course I care! After all, this is a toll call."

"I'm fine. Has there been any mail?"

"The usual junk. I've thrown out the department-store ads. That is, after extracting the bills."

"You shouldn't have. There might be some important sales going on."

"Jean, we've already saved so much money this year on those innocent merchants, I don't have the heart to take advantage of them again."

"In other words, I'm extravagant."

This could only be a losing battle. Al remembered back at his bachelor dinner what his father, more than a little high, had told him: "*Al, one strong word of advice. Never argue with a woman! It's like pissing off the windward rail—it all comes back in your own face.*"

"I didn't say that. How are the kids?"

"Fine."

Like the salmon on their way to the spawning grounds, this was uphill swimming all the way.

"Anything exciting going on?"

"What *could* be exciting in this dreadfully dull place?"

Al gave up. He wasn't a buck, a stallion, a gander—whatever you called the male salmon. "May I say hello to them?"

"I'll call them."

"Daddy!" It was Liz, gushing, giggling, spilling over, making him feel, as always, achingly protective.

To Liz, just beinning to grapple with the facts of life, to whom boys were beasts or squares or dreamy and utterly remote, Al was her special hero. He was tall and strong and self-confident and yet, with her, so tender and thoughtful. The man she would marry some day would be just like that, and she'd treat him a lot nicer than her mother treated her father, and they'd talk and talk, about everything and nothing, the way she and her father were talking now.

When she finally ran down, Al said gently, "I miss you, dear. Very much. Now let me say hello to your brother."

"Hi."

Like Jean, Dick sounded detached, almost remote. Al couldn't figure out whether it was the age, the sex, or Jean's influence. Always, with Liz, he had felt a very special asexual closeness, a father-daughter love more refined than the love a man feels for his mother. But the boy seemed to be escaping him, walking hand in hand with his mother away from him.

"Hi, Dick! What's new?"

"Nothing. Except that Grandma's cat had kittens again."

"Oh, no!"

"Yeah. I didn't ask for one."

"I didn't mean it that way, son."

"Yeah. I know."

Except for the soft electronic hum of the long-distance connection, there was silence. Al tried to think of something to say.

"What are you doing up there, Dick?"

"Oh, things."

"Like what?"

"Nothing special. Just things."

Did the uxorious salmon, having leaped up the falls and up the ladders of those irrigation gadgets to tryst with his mate, have to leap and leap again, thereafter, to make rendezvous with their ungrateful spawn? The hell with it! He wasn't a salmon.

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"Nice talking to you, boy," he said, forcing congeniality into his voice. "Now put Mommy back on. I forgot to tell her something."

"Yes, Al?" she said.

"I'd overlooked one letter. Nice, ladylike writing on the envelope. Probably another wedding invitation."

"You idiot! Open it! It might just be—read it to me!"

Al tore open the envelope and extracted an impressive invitation. He read the raised-print message aloud:

The patronesses request the presence  
of

Miss Elizabeth Walsh Babcock  
at

The Summer Cotillion

The Housatonic Yacht and Tennis Club

Saturday, the thirtieth of July  
8:00 P.M. to 1:00 A.M.

R.S.V.P.

"Oh, Al! It's wonderful!" Unexpectedly, the shrill, exultant tone softened into tenderness. "Oh, Al! I love you. You did come through! You did, didn't you?"

Again, her tone had changed. Jean was now the hard-driving, practical mother. "Look inside. There should be a small card in an envelope that gives a deadline for acceptance."

"Saturday, the sixteenth."

"Only a week and a half from now! So little time! I'll have to come right home to write the formal acceptance."

"I just noticed something. Do you know how much this shindig will cost us?"

"Al, how can you think of money at a time like this?"

"But they want a hundred dollars with the acceptance. And the remainder—four hundred—no later than a week before

the Cotillion. Five hundred's a lot of money for a girl to go dancing at her own Club!"

"Please, Al. I'm trying to make plans. Let's see. I can get them packed tomorrow, and we'll be home Friday. There's so much to do! Now let me get off the phone and start making lists."

"Friday night, you won't be too tired from all your running around?"

That was one of their regularly scheduled nights for love, and in spite of his lingering dismay over the unexpectedly high cost of a coming-out, he felt a little anticipatory thrill.

"Of course not, silly. Didn't I just say that I loved you? Now good night, Al, and be a good boy until Friday."

"Good night, Jean."

*Be a good boy. . . .*

Guiltily, he remembered the night with Margie. God, if Jean ever hears about that! Trying to forget that horror, he found himself thinking of Helen. She kept getting mixed up in his mind with Jean, and, though it seemed adulterous, he couldn't help wondering whether maybe she wasn't *like* Jean. Maybe it would take time and some patience to arouse her, but then she would be completely responsive. . . .

At your age, he sternly told himself, thinking about three women at the same time is ridiculous. Get a grip on yourself, Babcock.

He wandered into the kitchen, made a tall Scotch and soda, and decided his best therapy would be to sip it slowly, savor, and restrain his meditations strictly to the joys of good whisky. It didn't work.

One of the great illusions about summer bachelorhood is that, with its blessed silence and restful aloneness, a husband and father can relax without problems. Actually, without the accustomed domestic distractions serving to put the problems back into focus, they only get bigger. No sooner had Al gotten the women out of his mind than he began worrying about the Dreyer case.

The full Board would be meeting next Tuesday. He had only six days to settle the whole damned business. He looked

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at the phone, then shrugged. Why bother? He took not a sip, but a good long swig of his drink, and paced restlessly. He couldn't resist it. Impulsively, he dialed. "Jon? Al. No news?"

"No. And I'm getting just as interested as you. I'll call the minute I hear. I promise."

"Thanks. Sorry to have bothered you."

He replaced the receiver, and the phone rang.

"It's Paul, Al. I was just wondering. About that lead I passed on to you the other day?"

Paul had learned well from Peabottom, and, no matter what he really had in mind, the attack would be circuitous.

"Thanks, Paul. It didn't pan out. Somebody else signed up a nice piece of business."

In spite of himself, Al's tone was curt. His chief insurance competitor had snatched the plum, and, though he could never know, he suspected the reason. As a seeming gesture of friendship, Paul had called him, true, but he also could have tipped off the competition. Paul would play it two ways.

"I'm truly sorry, Al. With your kids growing up, I know you need all the business you can get. Oh, and by the way."

The casual phrase meant precisely the opposite of what it sounded like. "By the way" was the shaft, the zinger. Al waited suspiciously.

"Probably I shouldn't be saying this, but I know your deep interest in Club affairs, and I can trust your discretion."

Translate "deep interest" as meaning Al's personal ambition for advancement, and what the hell could Paul do about his Club career?

"As you know, as retiring Chairman of Nominating, Commodore Peabottom pretty much has the say on his successor."

Al laughed dryly. "He certainly can't be thinking of me."

"No, I don't mean that. This is very confidential and rather amusing, I think. The old boy can't seem to make up his mind between Jack Lyons and Nick Carnes."

So that was it. More blackmail over the Dreyers.

"Just curiosity, Al. You have any feeling in the matter?"



"No—no."

Yes! But he wasn't going to give Ling the satisfaction of admitting it. If Peabottom gave the nod to Jack Lyons, Al wouldn't make Fleet Captain because of his long-standing friction with the Tennis Group and Jack personally. But if Peabottom passed down the chairmanship to his obedient servant, Nick Carnes, and with it a helpful suggestion about Al, then Al would be firmly on the lowest rung of succession.

"Probably not important, but I knew you'd be interested. Again, sorry about the business misfire. Good night, Al."

"Thanks, Paul. Good night."

Now, wasn't that the warmest, truest sort of Christian kindness, for Paul to disclose confidential information about his own senior partner? Disclose, nothing! At Peabottom's prompting, he had merely relayed information that the old man wanted Al to get. The call had been just a reminder—serving to put the screws on Al—that his Club career hung on his handling of the Dreyers, that he had better get back into line fast.

Again the phone rang.

"Al, Silliman here. What the devil is going on at the Club? One thing after another. You heard about my son, of course? Everybody has. Making fun of the kid."

"I was sorry, sir."

"Bad judgment all the way. Bad screening of the coach in the first place. And our financial mess. I've had to stick my neck out as guarantor for fifty thousand dollars. I know I'm supposed to be rich, but that's a lot of money, boy, whatever bracket you're in."

"Congratulations, sir! You always come through when old Housatonic most needs it."

"Can't say the same for all of us. No sooner had I signed than Peabottom told me there'd been some complaints because a few, a very few, of my people who attended the employees' party happen to be Jews or Negroes. Do you know what those silly damned affairs cost me? Do you know how much the Club makes out of my hide? And then to get criticized! That's gratitude."

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Tactfully, Al withheld his own opinion of the Silliman blasts. "Must be some of the newer members, sir. The old-timers know your generosity, and they wouldn't dream of criticizing."

"Members! Glad you reminded me. So damned mad that I almost forgot why I called. Peabottom indicated to me that there seems to be something sticky about the Dreyer candidacy. He indicated that you're involved, Al. Now, what the devil is going on? They're nice people. You must have read my letter of support."

"Admissions is expediting the application as fast as possible."

"Expedite, hell! That's what I tell my suppliers who are always expediting, too. Let's get some action! I want the stuff in the store, not stuck on a siding in Toledo. Now, what about Dreyer?"

"I can assure you that the candidacy will come up before the full Board next Tuesday."

"Good! First pleasant news I've heard in days. I tell you, Al, what with Communists all over the world and labor organizers all over my store, I know my grandfather had a better life in his little ribbon shop."

"I'm sure he did," Al said consolingly. And he probably was a nicer guy, he added to himself. "Good night, sir."

Before he had time to make himself another drink, that shrill instrument of interruption rang again.

"Hello!" he said impatiently. "Oh, Jon. You've heard?"

"Yes!"

Jon's voice was excited. "Al, Dreyer is impossible. *Dreadful*. Drinks like a fish. Chases around more than ever."

"Good!"

"Good?"

"I mean, it's good that we found out."

What *did* he mean? Why was he so pleased to learn that Helen had a drunken, skirt-lifting husband? Had he perhaps felt unconscious jealousy, thinking of them lying together, now was he feeling relieved because a woman like Helen couldn't possibly give herself completely to such a beast?

"Al, you still on the phone?"

"Oh. Sorry, Jon. Just trying to think out the next step."

"Only one thing to do. Call Peabottom. Tell him the facts and get him to withdraw the application."

"Won't do any good. He's committed his Club and professional prestige to Dreyer. Even if he weren't so stubborn, there'd be no way he could bow out gracefully."

"If you don't, there will be a distressing showdown at the board meeting."

"Can't be helped."

Jon's voice was apologetic. "I've been thinking things over. I'm still very angry with Peabottom. Very angry. But I don't have much stomach for showdowns."

"Give me a better idea."

"I still say we should settle this ahead of time quietly in the gentlemanly way. If you won't call Peabottom, let me tell him."

"No! I'd rather lose your support at the meeting than tip him off now—and give him six days to figure out an answer."

Jon saw the opportunity Al had presented, and seized it. "All right, you're the chairman. But if you won't let me call him, then I can't promise my all-out support next Tuesday night. I'm sorry."

"Fair enough, Jon. And thanks for all you've already done. I know it's been difficult and awkward. Good night."

Al understood Jon, and it came as no shock that he wasn't a stand-up guy. But he felt contemptuous, and a little sad, that fine old Yankee blood was running so watery.

Jack Lyons was openly hostile, and Al could not count on McDermott or Carnes. Abernathy might go along with him. Jon might, too, if there was some way he could lend undercover support, if he didn't have to stand up and be counted.

There was only one possible way. And Al would have to touch off the fireworks, openly and alone, gambling that maybe, just maybe, somebody would have the guts to back him up.

He got up and went into the gloomy little library, where he unlocked one of the glass doors of the somber mahogany

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bookcase. With its jutting claw feet and fluted columns, the Victorian piece was the epitome of heavy good taste. He got out a volume of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and ran his finger down the listings for BL till he came to BLACKBALL.

"... The rules of most clubs provide that a stated proportion of 'blackballs' shall exclude candidates proposed for election," the *Britannica* explained in its chaste, scholarly prose, "and the candidates so excluded are said to have been 'blackballed'; but the ballot is now usually conducted either by voting papers or by balls cast into different compartments of a ballot box."

Didn't tell him anything he hadn't already known. Al looked up the ugly-sounding word in *The Oxford Universal Dictionary*, learning only that as a verb "blackball" had been used back as far as 1770. The quotation used as an example was, "I shall make a note to blackball him at the Athenaeum," and its author amused Al. It was Disraeli—a fine old Jewish name.

Of the various rigors inflicted on candidates, such as the embarrassing interviews with Admissions and the posting of their names so that all might see, blackballing was undoubtedly the cruelest. Yet a device that had survived in verb form for almost two hundred years must have some merit. A secret vote was the last defense of men harassed by the business, social, or personal pressures of an undesirable.

Just one more phone call, then one more drink and off to bed.

The number was too new to be in the book, and he had to ask Information for it. Then he dialed.

"Dr. Carmichael speaking," said the crisp professional voice.

"Alvin Babcock of Housatonic, Doctor. Sorry to call so late, but I do wish you would answer a question for me."

"Only too happy, Mr. Babcock."

His voice was faintly curious. Once they put away their various pills and instruments for cutting at the end of the day, Housatonic's G.P.'s and surgeons also tried to put out of their minds as completely as possible all thought of aches,

pains, patients, and syndromes. But Dr. Carmichael was studying psychiatry, and psychiatrists are twenty-four-hour-a-day doctors. Their specialty is not so much a technique as an involvement of asking, listening, probing, and socially as well as professionally they find themselves asking, listening, probing even when no fee is involved.

In the several times that they had met at the Club, Al Babcock had aroused in Dr. Carmichael a clinical interest. Physically, he looked to be in good shape. Drank a bit too much, but held it well, and had the constitutional leanness of the Yankee, a good prognosis for longevity. He was well adjusted to his environment and obviously popular at the Club.

Yet Dr. Carmichael had noticed the man's occasional lapses into silence, a sudden, strained look in the eyes when his guard was momentarily down. Mr. Babcock was obviously under a continuing tension. He, a relative stranger, could only speculate on the cause: his wife, another woman, business, perhaps even Club problems, because Mr. Babcock was obviously a very conscientious individual.

If he judged rightly—and this surmise was most unprofessional, deducing so much from so little—Mr. Babcock had recently found himself in a most frustrating life situation. He wasn't prepared for it, in view of his previous good adjustment, and if he couldn't come to terms with it, he might react most unpredictably. Under the dull veneer of upper-middle-class respectability, Mr. Babcock was a subject worthy of observation.

Al tried to sound casual. "This is purely hypothetical, Doctor. But the story you told us—about the Jewish husband with the unfaithful Christian wife—has been bothering me for some reason."

Now, what on earth was he leading up to? Mr. Babcock seemed a very practical man, and he obviously hadn't called at this hour to discuss the maladjustments of mixed marriage. Perhaps *unfaithful Christian wife* was the significant phrase. A light, pleasantly skeptical attitude seemed indicated, to keep the subject at his ease.

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"Yes, Mr. Babcock? You know, I am always amazed to find out how much curiosity exists among laymen about hypothetical cases. Isn't it odd? Laymen almost never ask about their own families or friends. Always about this hypothetical fellow."

"*Touché*, Doctor. But—my question. Supposing the situation were reversed?"

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow."

"Supposing the wife were Jewish and the husband Christian? Would he be prone to unfaithfulness?"

Now this was something else altogether. Could he be talking about himself?

"Really, Mr. Babcock, I don't relish attempting a telephone analysis. And one simply can't generalize, of course, about *all* Christian men with Jewish wives. But I daresay you have some good reason for your question. Let me think a minute."

There was silence, then Dr. Carmichael continued. "Given some basic drive to wander, granted there is a more aggressive sex drive in the male, I think one could, in many cases, look for the inclination you describe—though not necessarily for actual acts of unfaithfulness, if I make myself clear."

"Not entirely, Doctor. Would the Christian husband pursue Christian women to prove they weren't a damned bit better than his Jewish wife?"

Either Mr. Babcock was jealous of his wife or he himself had a sexual involvement—or, as it was beginning to seem, he was asking questions which may have no personal psychiatric implication. That would be very odd.

"I would say yes, Mr. Babcock. Again, granted the basic drive to wander."

"Even if he still doesn't love his wife?"

*Aha, Babcock! You trapped yourself that time. It is you.*

"There must have been some strong emotion, some attraction, or they, this hypothetical couple, wouldn't have married. Now it has whiplashed."

"Just one more question. Assume he was a chaser even before marriage."

Now it *wasn't* Babcock. Dr. McDonald had told him quite a bit about his younger friend and patient, and there hadn't been the slightest hint that he was more than normally attracted to women.

"All the worse for our hypothetical man! He has always had the drive, and now he feels that he has the self-justification. A very gloomy prognosis, morally speaking, Mr. Babcock. I do hope it is no one at Housatonic. But then you did say the case was hypothetical."

"Entirely hypothetical, Doctor. Thank you very much."

"It was a pleasure, Mr. Babcock. Good night."

## ► *Chapter Eleven*

JULY
FRIDAY
8

As practically the only one-car family in their set, the Babcocks had something to apologize for. It was a minor status demerit, but one that bothered Jean inordinately, and not merely because she was a woman. Like Jon Winston, but for entirely different reasons, she put great store on the badges of place, and she grieved deeply that the attached garage flaunted only the Buick and not also a Volkswagen.

Even though she complained, she knew in her heart she had no reason to do so. After all, she herself didn't drive, and Liz was still too young to get her license. As Al pointed out with exasperating male practicality, he could drive only one car at a time.

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This morning she had had to bring the kids home by train from her mother's, and Al was to have picked them up at the railroad station shortly before noon. But a client had delayed him, and before he had left the office Jean was on the phone.

"Where are you? Still at the station?"

"Home, of course." Her voice was sharp. "We waited around and waited around and finally took a cab."

"Sorry, dear."

"That doesn't help. And the place is a mess! *And*, of course, you forgot to order any food, and the children are simply famished."

"Tell you what," he said placatingly. "Let me pick you up, and we'll lunch at the Club with the kids. Sort of a family reunion."

"Right away?"

"Right away."

"All right, then."

Al didn't dare risk a second delay. Within twenty minutes, the Babcocks *en famille* drove up to Housatonic Yacht and Tennis. He was trying to get her back into a good humor, but he couldn't entirely restrain his annoyance as they walked into the Club and he saw Jean cast a critical eye at the rugs, the drapes, the furniture.

"Just as faded and dirty as ever," she pronounced.

To a man who still deplored the disappearance of un-homogenized milk—the cream had remained at the top of the bottle (and you didn't have to buy a separate paper container at extra cost)—change, even change allegedly for the better, was suspect.

"In an old Club, Jean, you simply don't want hospital cleanliness and fancy new slipcovers. You can get that in any motel."

When her face clouded, he retreated. "But you must be awfully tired, dear. There's a nice corner table. What would you like? A martini? I'll fetch the drinks while you order. Get me a club sandwich. Abe, will you see that Mrs. Babcock and the children are taken care of?"



"Certainly, sir."

The waiter's round smiling Semitic face, in this sea of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic countenances, was a bit dismaying to visitors and new members. To tell the truth, in deference to the sensibilities of the older members, Abe represented Housatonic's sole token gesture of compliance with the anti-discrimination laws regarding hiring. But, curiously, once the scandal over having a *Jewish* waiter had died down, even the old-timers began to appreciate Abe's attentiveness and deft, speedy service. To each of his tables Abe conveyed the impression that he was in personal conspiracy with the kitchen to serve that particular table the best at once. "A good waiter," Peabottom himself had ruled.

Thereafter, while Housatonic wasn't sporting enough to go for two, Abe was accepted, and on his days off he worked at private parties in homes that had never seen a Jewish face, except possibly that of Dr. Weiss in times of obstetrical stress.

For his part, Abe seemed to accept Housatonic as it was without any particular rancor. If, on occasion, he had to suffer his occupational risk of a snubbing or reprimand, he preferred to take it from a *goy* rather than from one of his own.

Similarly, Al knew, Jewish clubs employed Christian help. Somewhere there, he thought, there must be a lesson, a moral for the interfaith movement, but he was damned if he could quite put his finger on it.

"Wake up, Al!" Jean said. "Don't just stand there mooning."

"Sorry. I'll fetch the drinks."

The Cellar was crowded, and while he was trying to catch Mike's eye he spotted Ed Abernathy standing near him at the bar. In his casual summer attire—a loud sports shirt open at the neck, disclosing a chest matted with black hair, and shorts that showed thick-muscled, equally hairy legs—Ed was a big, rough, Protestant equivalent of Pat McDermott.

He saluted Al with his glass. "Whisky! The answer to

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every wife, the ancient anodyne of mankind. . . Got your corroboration yet on—on our little problem, Al?"

"In spades!"

"Then our beloved Commodore Emeritus will have to withdraw the application."

Al shook his head. "In confidence, Ed, I'm not going to give him any advance tipoff. He'd be too stubborn to withdraw, anyhow, and I don't want to give him time to start some kind of counterattack."

"Oh-oh! Then there's sure to be hell to pay Tuesday night!" Ed chuckled in simple masculine anticipation of a fight. "Wouldn't miss that meeting for anything! The old fellow doesn't roll with the surprises at his age. Look how he's been treating poor Will Archer."

"The hell with him! You have a minimum set of values for the Club or you don't."

Ed took a long, thoughtful pull at his bourbon on the rocks. His face was troubled as he turned to look Al squarely in the eyes.

"Given the corroboration," he said slowly, "I promised to string along with you. I admit it. But I still want to be fair, not a snob. I'd like to know a little more about your—minimum set of values. Frankly, I'm suspicious."

"What do you mean?"

"You hear so much crappy talk these days about status, class, upward social mobility. Based on what? A few tired cliché words. Clubman? That means a gentleman, of course, unless it's the Elks or Moose that we're talking about. Ivy Leaguer? Very choice, unless he happens to be Jewish. And so on."

"You're still too deep for me, Ed."

"What I'm trying to say is that the intelligent, old-fashioned snobbery which judged only the specific case at hand has given way to blanket cliché thinking. Just take me, for example. Would you take me for a Harvard man?"

"It's hard to believe," Al commented dryly. "A bad year?"

"A good year! Thirty-four. We had the Depression, but when the war came we were old enough to wangle desk com-

missions or big Washington OPA jobs. Now we're coming into our fifties—and cracking up all over the place."

"Let's get off the campus."

"Please. At Harvard, it's the Yard."

"O.K. the Yard. What the hell exactly is on your mind?"

"Just this, Al. Nobody takes me for a Harvard man because my school has been made into a typical example of cliché thinking. Depending on whom you talk to, it's supposed to be all Groton or all Jewish or all Communist, and it's not."

"Or queer?"

"Goddammit, no! Or all intellectually arrogant, either. 'You can always tell a Harvard man, Mr. Bones, but, heh, heh, you can't tell him much.' Nuts!"

"You're telling me what, Ed?"

"That you can't plaster an all-inclusive label on us. That there are a lot of plain, rough, anti-Communist, masculine Harvard men like me. Hell, for all I know, even at Dartmouth, maybe they do more than ski and chase girls at drunken carnivals."

"Well?"

"When you talk about a minimum set of values for the Club, Al, I have an unhappy feeling. That you're a victim of cliché thinking. You must stack every candidate up against some private ideal. Maybe Commander Whitehead of HMS Schweppes. Elegant, bearded, very British. Or maybe the Man of Distinction in the old whisky ads."

"No!"

"Or—going back some, to when you were just a kid, the man in the Arrow Collar ad? That's it, Al! He's your ideal clubman. He wasn't Irish, Jewish, Italian, Puerto Rican, Negro. He was pure, pure Anglo-Saxon white Protestant."

"Christ, no! You sound like Jack Lyons. What are you, draping a white sheet over my head, or something?"

"I'm not trying to sermonize, Al. You're not a conscious bigot; you can't help that the tilt was put in you as a kid. I'm just trying to show you there *is* a tilt—and it's archaic. The census figures prove that."

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"I hate to keep playing your straight man, Ed. But I will. What the hell does the census have to do with it?"

"The census proves that the U.S.A. isn't a Wasp country. We're shot to hell through and through with minorities. Now, the real American, if his ancestors were honest, if they didn't cheat ethnically by marrying their own kind, is a very peculiar animal—far, far different from Mr. Arrow Collar. He should have an Anglo-Saxon Protestant father, an Irish Catholic mother, and grandparents who were German, Italian, Jewish. And—here's a bit of a rub—one Negro."

"What a goddamned crazy thought!"

Coming in from the courts, Ed's wife arrived just in time to overhear Al. She came up behind Ed, brushing against him as she took an empty place next to them at the bar. Ed smirked and turned to her slowly.

"Hell!" he said disappointedly. "I thought that ass felt familiar."

"Gentlemen! I don't think I like the language of either one of you."

"Sorry, Mrs. Abernathy, the party is getting a little rough. Will you excuse me? I've got to bring Jean her drink. Ed, you've got me entirely wrong. At least I think so. Keep an open mind Tuesday evening, will you?"

"I'll try, Al."

Fortunately, Jean was talking with Sally and hadn't missed him. Despite her dowager airs, Sally maintained a lively, malicious interest in the extracurricular goings-on at Housatonic, largely because she wasn't properly attended to at home by her pompous, rather ineffectual husband. They were one of those couples whom you could not imagine descending to the earthy, undignified conjugal pleasures.

Sally turned sweetly to Al.

"You seemed to be having *such* a nice time with Margie last Saturday."

"What do you mean?" Jean asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry, dear. I thought you knew. It was so amusing. Poor Al was at loose ends with you away, and

Margie happened to be alone. That was all. Perfectly innocent, of course."

Al tried to keep the defensive tone out of his voice. "The Lings were down with guests, and they happened to ask Margie to join them at dinner. And they happened to ask me to make it a sixsome."

"Of course, Al." Sally's tone was consoling, now that she had done the damage. "And I am glad that you minded your manners and didn't walk off and leave poor Margie after dinner the minute the others left. So many extra men these days are *simply* boors. Don't you agree, Jean?"

"Of course, Sally. Whom were the Lings entertaining?"

"The Dreyers. And I *was* pleased, Al, to see you having a long talk with Helen."

"First Margie, and now Helen Dreyer! My husband must have had a very active weekend."

Sally's laugh was a slightly conspiratorial tinkle. "We're glad, aren't we, Jean? In view of that silly talk, that Al was—well, being difficult. I'm sure that after his nice chat with Helen everything has been ironed out. Hasn't it, Al?"

Like Peabottom, Sally often couched her commands in the form of questions. Right now, now that Liz had received the Cotillion invitation, Al was being dunned to make good what Sally thought was his side of the bargain. If he only had the guts to tell this smug lady sergeant-major of Housatonic society what was really going to happen Tuesday night!

"The application is being expedited just as quickly as possible," he said. "Jean, I have to get back to the office. Why don't you stay down here the rest of the afternoon with the kids? I'll pick you up at five-ish."

When Al got back to the Club late in the afternoon, he realized immediately that he had made a tactical mistake in leaving Jean there so long. She was a little tight. And, from the look on her face, he knew that other dear, helpful friends like Sally had been reconstructing his lost Saturday night for her.

"You didn't tell me you were *so* polite to Margie that you

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didn't leave her unchaperoned all evening, right to closing time."

"Damn Margiel!"

"And this Dreyer woman. Everybody seems to think you have a case about her."

"We can't squabble here. I'll take you home and make you another drink. Then, after you get something to eat, you'll feel better."

His voice softened. "It's Friday night, remember?"

"I'll try to remember. But I'll need a few explanations—good explanations—first."

After dinner, while the kids were watching TV, they went up to Al's study. Jean closed the door. "Do you care to fill me in on your crowded social calendar last weekend?"

"I was going to tell you, anyhow. But that bitch Sally manages to put everything in the worst possible light."

"Don't blame Sally for what you did!"

"I didn't do much of anything. Except to make a moderate horse's ass of myself in public. For which I am honestly sorry."

Basically, Al was a truthful man, but somehow he didn't feel as guilty as he should have about lying to Jean. Margie had been a passing, physical, drunken indiscretion that would never happen again. Promising that to himself eased his conscience.

"Jean, if I had my way, we'd have no single women or divorcees in Housatonic. They're just bad news. And that goes particularly for Margie, believe me."

His sincerity mollified her a little.

"All right. I'm relieved that you think that way about her, Al. Now, what about your other weekend companion?"

"You dragged me into that situation! You and all the others who want the Dreyers in the Club for one reason or another. What was I supposed to do? Snub her? Would that have made your precious friend Sally feel more kindly disposed to us?"

In the curious spectrum of guilt, he felt more defensive about Helen, undoubtedly because he really did like her. But,

fortunately, the Dreyers reminded Jean of Liz's little social triumph to come, and she was distracted from her mood of jealousy.

"You can be sweet, Al, in spite of everything," she said, her voice momentarily sweet. "From the way Sally talked, I know you're really responsible for Liz's invitation. This is more important to her than you'll ever know."

He simply couldn't disabuse her, couldn't tell her what was going to happen Tuesday night. Manfully, he just dismissed the subject from his mind—and all that might happen when Jean eventually found out—and counterattacked. "Why is a debut so all-fired important? In my day, they gave private parties, and I still think that's good enough, and a damned sight cheaper."

"Oh, don't talk like a husband, complaining about money. Why, just this afternoon, Sally's husband was saying that whenever he sees the Cotillion gold disc on a girl's charm bracelet, he *knows* she will be a little more refined, a little more ladylike than the non-deb."

"Pompous old fart!"

"Al! He's a West Point gentleman, and he has the grandest manner of anyone in Housatonic."

"Something he picked up at the Rock. I saw the same kind out of Annapolis when I was in the Navy. You don't salute the man, you salute the uniform. And they carry it over to *people*. If they bow or stand for a lady, they make very condescendingly clear that no personal honor is intended. As officers and gentlemen, they are saluting the sex, not the particular lady. You can have the grand manner!"

Unexpectedly, Jean laughed. "I must admit he is a bit stuffy, especially if you're stuck with him for half an hour." She paused. "It's late, and I must take Liz shopping early tomorrow. I'm going to take a bath."

She looked invitingly toward him. "Why don't you tell the children to go to bed early, and come in later?"

When Al joined her, she was lying naked and perfumed under the covers. The bedside radio was playing softly.

Quickly he stripped and slid into bed alongside her, but

► Friday, July 8

his preliminary love play was cumbersome. Jean believed that he had come through in the Dreyer business, and he felt guilty, as if he was occupying his own bed under false pretenses. If a man can seduce his wife, he thought, I'm doing it tonight.

Goddammit, why did the woman always have guilt feelings about passion! As he explored her with hands and mouth, she positively radiated guilt, her moans of ecstasy and remorse projecting it into him as she twisted with increasing fervor.

*Al, do you really think that we should at our age? Isn't this shameful? Do other people do these things? I should be planning for Liz. There's so little time. . . .*

Yet, as she protested, her legs came up, resting on his calves, then slid slowly up, down almost to his ankles, back up again, then faster as her torso writhed faster, too, and as the movements outraced his own, the legs locked him firmly to her, and she came up against him with final, violent thrusts.

*We shouldn't be . . . Al . . . Shouldn't be . . . Oh, Al*



JULY
MONDAY
11

### NOON

Though only the snack bar and a makeshift outdoor whisky bar were open at the Club on Mondays, the Board had generously allocated that day for all the women's tournaments and team matches, hoping to God they'd get the game out of their systems before midweek when the men players, even the commuters, would steal time from the job for a set or two before twilight. As Al nosed the big Buick into the crowded parking lot, he heard the shrill shouts of Ladies' Tennis at wholesome, catty play.

He didn't give a damn about tennis, of course, but, as he virtuously told his conscience, he was here on a high parental mission. Liz was graduating from Junior Tennis and intra-Club matches to ladies' play with another club, and he wanted to give her moral support. It was a great day for her, a triumph that even a skilled Club politician like Al could only partly appreciate because no man fully comprehended the sly intricacies of that sub-Group known as Ladies' Tennis.

There were at least three feminine cliques. The first was the power elite, the social element who took the sport far more seriously than was justified by their talents, even sucking an orange between games the way the pros do. They were headed by Sally, a somewhat improbable figure as Ladies' Chairman.

► Monday, July 11/Noon

With the outraged logic of the young, Liz had protested to her mother that Sally ran Ladies' Tennis with an iron racquet and didn't know enough about the game to do so. Though Liz sensed the continuing tension between her parents and guiltily sided with her father, on matters like this she confided in Jean. Jean wanted to console her, wanted to re-establish the intimacy of Liz's little-girl years when she had been such a quiet, obedient child. But she couldn't let Sally down, even in the privacy of her own home.

"You just don't understand, Mother! She has *five* racquets, Slazenger and Italian Sirt frames, and Riviera gut, when all she does is lob, lob, *lob*. She wouldn't go through *one* racquet in five years."

"Now, Elizabeth, you must be respectful toward Sally. She has been Ladies' Chairman ever since I can remember."

"Which is why all the other clubs wallop us! You should just talk to Mrs. Winters if you don't believe me."

"Elizabeth, I would prefer that you did not become over-friendly with Mrs. Winters. Really, my dear, she is a bit too sophisticated for you."

"She's nice! And she treats me as a grown-up, too."

"Mrs. Winters is something of a trouble-maker. In more things than tennis. You are going to be a *debutante*, and you must be very careful in your associations."

Liz had learned that, when grown-ups became impossibly stubborn, the only thing to do was to change the subject. But Margie Winters, who headed up the second clique, the really good women players, remained her private tennis heroine.

This group didn't give a damn about making the teams because that would merely represent a political appointment by Sally. Instead, they held back for the Club tournaments, which were open to all the women, and in which they bowled over Sally's favorites, thus occasionally forcing, rather than asking, her to put them on the teams.

These younger women were also a bit nicer to the third group, the most cruelly put upon in their own opinion and

probably in fact—the girls in their teens and very early twenties, including Liz.

Sally's clique dismissed the youngsters as children, annoyingly attractive children sound of wind and fast of limb, who must definitely be put and kept in their place. Not yet possessing the insolent security and lemony knowledge of their own sex, like Margie's crowd, the kids were bewildered and sometimes crushed.

But even in the orderly, authoritarian world as administered by Peabottom and Sally, accidents occasionally happened, and that was why Liz was triumphant today.

With Margie as her partner, she had swept through the women's doubles to victory in the finals, 6-3, 6-0, over Sally's team, thus posing a problem for orthodoxy. Sally couldn't ignore *both* Liz and Margie at today's interclub match with Weston.

Properly, Margie should have gotten the nod, but—at Sally's age and in her position—a wise leader gives first consideration to putting the proper people in their proper spots. Sally had most effectively snubbed Margie and her whole rebellious clique by instead choosing Liz for one of HY&T's five doubles teams against Weston.

Al grudgingly admired the play, and he was happy that Liz, radiant over the possibility that she might even play *first* doubles, was too innocent, too unspoiled to realize she was a pawn in a not very nice ladies' game.

Maneuvering the Buick alongside Jack Lyons' car, one of those little foreign jobs that make so much unnecessary noise in low gear, Al realized, in all honesty, that his visit to the Club today was motivated by more than parental pride, by an emotion he couldn't quite put his finger on.

With the Dreyer showdown set for tomorrow evening, he was tense, irritable; he felt an orneriness, maybe even a sort of death wish to expose himself, deliberately and for the last time, to the inevitable pressures from the Peabottom-Dreyer clique. It was just past noon. Liz's match wouldn't start until two o'clock, so he had plenty of time for a couple of drinks

Lyons was standing at the bar, correct but frustrated in his tennis whites. More than in most other bisexual pastimes like golf, bridge, or even sailing, the male tennis player feels supreme condescension toward the ladies. Now, with soft serves, dull lobs, ragged little rallies, they were cluttering up all five courts, and Jack would be lucky if he got in one set before twilight.

On the other hand, he took himself very seriously as the overall Tennis Chairman. So no doubt he was counting the turnout, listing Housatonic's occasional victories over Weston, and estimating the bar receipts, all of which he would report with triumphant total recall at tomorrow night's board meeting.

Alongside Jack, dutifully waiting to cheer for his wife when she played later, was Ed Abernathy, big, hairy, muscular. He could easily model, Al thought, for the well-dressed long-shoreman in casual summer attire. Of the two, Ed and Jack, very few persons would correctly guess which one was the Harvard man.

From the dock, very nautically dressed as ever, Nick Carnes came over to join them at the bar. "The usual, please, Mike. It's past noon, and proper time to splice the main brace."

"Good God!" Abernathy growled. "Here we go to sea again in a tub, rub-a-dub-dub."

"Ed, please! I don't make cracks about your little hobby. Why must you always poke fun at sailing?"

"I'm sorry, Nick. Really. But you fancy pants always bring out the beast in me. You're so damned—well, Groton-y. I went to Central High in Bridgeport myself, and I got a real bellyful of those broad-A guys up in Cambridge."

"I will interpret that as an apology. Heaven knows you aren't interested, and Al probably has to go back to his stupid, stuffy office. So what about a sail, Jack? Beautiful breeze, shouldn't be wasted on landlubbers."

Jack shrugged. "Might as well. Won't be able to get a court for hours."

As they walked down toward the dock together, Ed eyed them thoughtfully.

"That's a strange sort of friendship, Al. Jack, with all his inherited money and phony, mixed-up liberalism, and Nick, really ultraconservative, a boy who has had to scrabble for a living. I guess what brings them together is that they're both phonies."

"Nick's a popinjay, a bore, a monomaniac on sailing. But do you really figure him for a phony?"

"O.K., let's be charitable. He's just a horse's ass. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

From the courts came a commanding call. "Ed-ward, dear."

Ed gulped down the last of his bourbon. "Oh-oh. Mama is about to take to the court and politely requests my loyal attendance. This is my private cross, Al, personally carpentered for Ed Abernathy by the good Lord."

"Don't put on an act. I've seen you claquing for Mama, and you love the gamesmanship. Mama's opponent aces her and you exclaim, 'Nice shot!' In just the properly surprised tone that really means, 'You lucky slob!'"

Ed grinned. "That part, I admit, I do like. Women were made to be goosed. Sometimes I can get her opponent so damned mad."

"Then stop crying and go enjoy yourself."

"It isn't that. You're always hearing about overage athletes giving games the old college try, right into their sixties. Well, this country is facing a problem these days in overage *women* athletes. Mama never got over the shock of Suzanne Lenglen's retirement, and her game has been going downhill ever since."

"Cut it out."

"No, I'm telling you the truth, Al. Each year, I have to yell 'Nice shot!' more and more often, and this season, so help me, I'm practically hoarse."

"You two get along beautifully together."

"Purely for the sake of accuracy and without any criticism, overt or implied, let me put it another way. I get along with Mama. See you later."

► *Monday, July 11/Afternoon*

"One more drink, and I'll join you. I've got to catch Liz's debut with the big girls."

"Oh, I almost forgot. You still haven't told the old man about Dreyer?"

"No, and I still don't intend to. I've told you it's no use. Peabottom would rather live with a mistake than have to admit it."

"There's going to be a hot time in the old home town tomorrow night!"

► *Chapter Thirteen*

JULY
MONDAY
11

*AFTERNOON*

With all the activities centered on the courts, the Mall was practically deserted, as Al carried a fresh drink to a table as far out of earshot of the gladsome tennis cries as possible.

The implications of what Ed had termed "phony, mixed-up liberalism" were clearly before him now, bothering him more than he wanted to admit. Pressures from outside dogooders, from inside liberals like Jack, and from vote-cadging politicians were slowly building up against private clubs. He could feel it, and it frightened him a little.

A nightmarish thought flashed through his mind.

There would always be more Outs than Ins, and what if they began strongarming the authorities, as they easily could, to harass the clubs into accepting practically any candidate

who had the price of admission? They could force the local tax assessor to hike Housatonic's ratables or persuade Police Chief O'Brien to interpret and enforce the parking and antinoise laws to the letter.

Well, maybe that sort of thinking was farfetched because Peabottom could probably fix anything in the county, but supposing they pulled strings on the national level?

Already, Al paid Uncle Sam a 20 per cent tax—non-deductible—on his yearly dues at Housatonic, and there was the same bite on initiation fees. Hike that another 10 per cent, and most members would have to drop out, while potential members would stay out. What had always seemed to him a secure, well-moated refuge for fun and games was becoming a beleaguered castle.

Under the threat of punitive taxation or police reprisal, Housatonic would have to give in, and, as he tossed down the last of his drink, Al foresaw the inevitable, illogical conclusion of the Every-Man-a-Clubman push.

The Yale Club would be under orders to take in Harvard men, and the Knights of Columbus would be constrained to accept thirty-second degree Masons; the English-Speaking Union would make enforced, common jollity with the Young Communist League, and wouldn't that be a hell of a lot of fun for all!

Two drinks on an empty stomach must have made him morbid, he decided, and he'd best grab a hamburger and mosey along to the courts. Housatonic's non-tennis-team ladies were finishing up their sets before the matches with Weston got under way, and as he approached he recognized the voices. Joyce Ling's peremptory "*Thank you*" as she called to the next court to return a stray ball . . . The wailing, "*Mommy! Mommy!*" of Housatonic's little orphan, Margie's brat . . . A rumbling, surprised "*Nice shot!*"

Al grinned. To tell the truth, Ed did sound a little hoarse.

Ed's wife was playing singles in the first court with Sally Morgan, an arrangement which perhaps befitted their low seniority numbers but certainly not their lumbering game. Somebody, probably Joyce Ling, had brought Helen Dreyer

► Monday, July 11/Afternoon

as a guest. The two of them, with Margie and Jack Lyons' wife, Ellen, were playing doubles in the next court.

Maybe he was getting oversensitive, but Al had the feeling that, just as Margie and Joyce had excluded Helen during dinner at the Club that earlier Saturday night, the three Housatonic women were now keeping her out of the court repartee. Certainly, in bitchiness, Ellen Lyons could hold up her head as proudly as Joyce or Margie.

He wanted to watch Helen, to give her the moral support of his presence, but for the time being, he was stuck with Ed. Finally, mercifully, after a long, lethargic rally, Sally's lob was slow enough for even Ed's wife to get well back behind the ball. She planted herself firmly, swung and missed, and lost the game.

"Now why do I do that, Daddy?" she appealed to Ed. "I *know* how to play, and I have a *good* racquet, and I thought I was *right* on that ball."

"Nice shot, Sally," Ed said dutifully.

"Pish and tush, Ed Abernathy! I know your little tricks. Well, that's all for now. We'd better get off the courts so the matches can start."

Sally came over to the spectators' bench, dangerously flushed but still game, still talking.

"Why, Al Babcock! What a surprise on a Monday. But you want to see Elizabeth play, of course. Such touching fatherhood. But where's Jean?"

"Shopping. Looking for dresses and shoes and something called *sixteen*-button white kid gloves, and not a button less, for Liz's coming-out."

"Naturally. How stupid of me. Let me tell you one thing, Al Babcock. During the next few weeks, be very patient with Jean. She is going to be under an enormous strain getting everything ready."

Al refused to be impressed. "Historically, the social gesture whereby boy formally meets girl at the marriageable age has always been the mother's job, hasn't it? I'm sure that Mrs. Neanderthal told her husband to put his club away and not



spit marrow into the cave fire because important company was dropping in."

"That really isn't very funny, Al. If you knew how hard we ladies must work at these things."

"That's where I think you make unnecessary work for yourselves, Sally. Some societies paint the girls' faces—or the gate-posts. An eminently practical, economical solution. But when I suggested it to Jean, she said it was *absurd*. Why?"

"Al, you're impossible."

Though he disliked her, Al enjoyed his conversations with Sally because they were really split-level conversations. There was what you said on the surface and what you wanted to get across underneath and, as a Yankee, he had the cocky feeling that he could be as devious as any woman.

Right now, Sally was trying to sell him on the importance of a debut to prove to him that the Dreyers' admission to Housatonic was a very bargain price for what Al was getting in return.

Only Al wasn't buying. He honestly didn't believe it was that all-fired important and, considering what was going to happen tomorrow night, he couldn't let Sally sell him—or he might lose his nerve.

Sally sensed his resistance and felt nettled. Al had always been a sound, reliable young man, a comfort to a hostess, a conscientious workhorse in Club affairs. Not a sparkling conversationalist or a wit or an individualist, in fact a bit dull, which was all to the good. At her dinner parties, at the Club, Sally wanted a bland, custard-like conformity, not jarring cleverness that might make people stop and *think*.

Lately, something had come over Al. He was *thinking* about something—or someone—all the time, and he seemed to have lost his proper respect for the proper people. She didn't like it at all.

"You probably think that we're just social butterflies. Ha-ha-ha, Al Babcock! *Ha-ha-ha*. For three months, our committee has had to study and pass rulings on everything from dress, decorations, and corsages to escorts, music, and pocket

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flasks. Maybe those things don't interest you, but I think *this* will."

Her voice dropped melodramatically. "As you know, Connecticut law forbids the serving of alcoholic beverages to anyone under twenty-one. So only nonalcoholic champagne will be served at the tables."

"Something's got to be done about that law."

"There was also some talk in committee that the bar should be completely closed, too."

"No!"

"I thought that might interest you, Al. Happily, we have decided that the adults will be permitted to drink, so long as they take the responsibility of making sure that liquor is not served at their tables."

"All I can say, Sally, is that I am very grateful the committee will allow me to drink in my own Club."

"I might have known you would be incorrigible! But you men, you directors here, who are always talking about long-term, five-year improvement programs—it sounds like Communist Five-Year Plans to me!—might be interested in one thing. The amount of detailed *planning* that we ladies do."

"I'm sure you do," Al said hastily, hoping to spare himself the full recitation of those details. "We all respect your dedication."

Sally ignored the interruption.

"We have arranged for *four* special policemen, *two* men just to park the cars, a *uniformed* doorman and *red velvet carpeting* on the steps at the entrance. Oh, Al, Housatonic will do itself proud on the thirtieth!"

She leaned closer, and her voice was almost a whisper. "I don't want our guests from Weston to hear me. But you know, of course, what happened last year at *their* Cotillion?"

"Afraid not, Sally. I don't know many people up in Weston."

"Shh! Well, two of their girls blistered their feet so badly while dancing that they had to sit out the last hour."

"Tragic."

"And three of them practically lost their petticoats right on the dance floor!"

"Delightful."

"Stop it, Al! The point is, we are *prepared*. We will stock-pile bandages in the powder room to take care of any blistered feet. And we are going to hire a dresser for the evening, who will have needle, thread, and safety pins in case of any accidents."

In spite of himself, Al was becoming impressed. With genius, even more than ordinary, so-so genius, Sally's committee was displaying a capacity for infinite detail.

"And that isn't all that went wrong up there in Weston, where that new postwar society fancies itself. Three other girls full-curtisied to the major-domo when they arrived! We are making sure that every girl gets a *full* description of our major-domo in advance."

Out of the corner of his eye, Al saw Margie, Joyce Ling, and Ellen Lyons heading for the bar. Helen was trailing slightly behind them.

"Sally, I salute you. Honestly, how you do all this and run tennis, too, I just don't know. I won't hold you up any more. I know you want to get the matches started pretty soon."

This was impertinence! *He* was dismissing *her*? Well, there would have to be some last-minute readjustments in the team assignments to teach him a lesson or two.

"It is a rat race, Al! So much to do, and if *I* don't do it, I don't know who will. Right now, I must see if that addle-headed Mike remembered the oranges. Between games, you know, they give the girls energy without too much liquid."

Casually, but as quickly as he could, Al went into the bar.

"Ladies!" He made an exaggerated bow, and turned to Helen. "Helen, an unexpected pleasure to see you here!"

"Hello, Al!"

Her warmth, his own, for that matter, dismayed him. It seemed their intimacy increased disproportionately each time they met, as though some outside force were pushing them together.

► Monday, July 11/Afternoon

And Helen was wondering guiltily whether she hadn't really accepted Joyce Ling's invitation today in the hope that she might see Al. He looked tired and tense. A little muscle high on his cheekbone under the right eye twitched slightly. She felt a sudden maternal compassion.

The three ladies of Housatonic turned speculative eyes on them, and Al thought, Oh-oh, the witches of *Macbeth* in modern dress.

Joyce, Margie, Ellen, they didn't need eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog. A martini, a Bloody Mary, a vodka on the rocks, with tongue of bitch, served splendidly. He turned deliberately from Helen and made his voice as casual as he could. "May I buy a drink for the athletes?"

"I've already made out the chit," Joyce said. "Helen isn't interested."

"Of course she is! Helen, I'm having a Scotch and soda. Won't you join me?"

Her voice was casual, too. "All right, Al. Thank you."

Joyce handed the drinks to Margie and Ellen.

"If you don't mind, Helen, Al, we'll go ahead and drink. Ellen and I are teamed against Weston in an hour, and we shouldn't be drinking at all."

The bar was crowded now, and by the time Mike got around to the Scotches and soda for Helen and Al, the other three had almost finished theirs.

Joyce nodded to Ellen. "I think we ought to report to Sally. She gets nervous before matches. Margie, won't you watch us? The teams always find your comments so constructive. If Al bores you, Helen, you come, too."

The setup couldn't have been more obvious, though Al couldn't be quite sure why Joyce was throwing Helen at him. Maybe it was a last-minute ploy in the Dreyer case, and he was supposed to succumb to Helen's charms. Maybe it was just Joyce's instinct for trouble, knowing the word would get back to Jean. Somehow, he didn't care.

"Go about your duties, ladies. As a director, I feel a responsibility for Club guests, and I will entertain Mrs. Dreyer."

When their drinks came, he took Helen to the Mall, to the same table they'd had the day she turned her ankle.

"Al."

"Helen."

They spoke simultaneously, and laughed.

"Ladies first."

"I just wanted to apologize, Al. I know I embarrassed you a few minutes ago. I didn't mean to be forward, or flirty, or anything like that. Honestly I didn't. I was just glad to see you."

"I embarrassed myself, Helen. I didn't realize, till I spoke, how glad I was to see you."

"It's funny in a way, isn't it? You aren't a ladies' man like—like a lot of men. I can sense that. And I think I'm as far from being a flirt as a woman can be. And yet, after meeting only a few times, we feel close. What does it mean?"

"Sounds suspiciously like the start of an affair."

Her olive cheeks reddened slightly. "Please, Al."

"I'm sorry. That was cheap. I take it back."

There was an awkward silence. Al wanted to tell her about tomorrow night. It seemed treacherous not to prepare her. But for the sake of old Housatonic, as he saw his duty to old Housatonic, it just wouldn't be right.

I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honor more. *Love?* Wait a minute! You're in a skid, Babcock, hit the brakes gently. "Helen, if I ask a frank question, will you give me a frank answer?"

"Of course."

"Do you *really* like this Club?"

"Not particularly."

"The women members? You find them sort of bitchy?"

"I don't like that word, Al. It's just that I feel I don't belong. They don't accept me, but that's their right."

There was a sudden, unexpected flash of pride in her sad, dark eyes. "I've been snubbed before, and I don't care to go where I'm not wanted."

Always, with this woman, Al had conflicting emotions. Remembering his mother, he sympathized almost achingly, and

► Monday, July 11/Afternoon

yet it was a relief that she really didn't care about getting into Housatonic.

"But why do you ask? I know there's been some trouble about our candidacy. It's me, isn't it?"

"Oh, no, Helen!"

"You're being nice. It must be."

"No, I tell you!"

"Then there's something against Joe?"

"Please, Helen. Understand my position. I don't want to be stuffy—to hold back—with you of all people. But, Club rules, you know."

"I understand. The only reason I asked if I were the stumbling block is that, well, I may be able to remove that stumbling block."

"I'm afraid that I don't quite understand."

"Now it's my turn to sound stuffy, I guess. I wish I could talk openly, but I haven't quite made up my mind. It would be so shabby to talk, even with you. I don't have anyone to talk to!"

"Your family?"

"Dad is lost. I couldn't bother him. We never got along very well, anyhow. And my brother—well, he's just a lawyer. He looks at everything from the loophole angle. I don't want to do the shrewd thing; I don't even want justice. I just want the *right* thing."

"I think I'm beginning to understand," Al said slowly. "And I know how you feel. I'm going through the same thing myself."

"You!"

"Yes, me! What the devil is so surprising about that in the suburbs? Do I act so damned smug that I seem to be above trouble?"

"Oh, no, of course not, Al. But your position here in Housatonic, in business, in the Club, in society. It's just that I, an outsider, looked up to you, envied you, sort of. I couldn't imagine you in trouble."

"Well, I am. And with no one to talk to, either."

"You can always talk to me, Al. Always."

"Not now. It would be just what you said. Shabby. Come on, it's almost two, and I have to watch Liz. Anyhow, with one more Scotch, we'd be crying in each other's drink."

At the courts, the women clustered around Sally as she announced the teamings.

"Mrs. Ling, Mrs. Lyons, the first court, please."

Al saw the crestfallen expression on Liz's face. She'd so hoped to make first doubles.

"Oh, there you are, Elizabeth. You and Mrs. Abernathy will take the fifth court, please."

"The fifth!"

Liz's exclamation was involuntary. She cast a stricken look toward Al. He tried to nod reassuringly, but he swore under his breath. Helen turned sharply.

"What's wrong?"

"Just that she's being teamed with the worst player, in the last court."

"But why? Somebody told me that she and Mrs. Winters won the women's doubles."

"It would be hard to explain without using that descriptive word about your sex that you dislike so much. Liz is being put in her place and so, I suspect, am I."

But he had to give the old monster, Sally, credit for squeezing the last drop of vitriol out of a situation. First, she had snubbed Margie's clique by picking Liz over Margie. Second, she had humiliated the youngsters by putting Liz on the lowest team, which she couldn't have done if she had chosen Margie. And, third, she was telling him, Al Babcock, that he'd better be careful tomorrow night.

He didn't mind for himself, but how could he explain to a seventeen-year-old girl the infinite bitchiness of her own sex? How could he toughen her up to meet the slights and snubs and humiliations that nice people like to inflict on other nice people?

Impulsively, Helen squeezed his hand. "May I go with you to watch? I'm sure she needs cheering."

"Please do. Nobody ever bothers to watch the fifth court. Except for Ed Abernathy, we'll be the only ones there."

► *Monday, July 11/Afternoon*

They were, and it was slaughter. Liz was fast, too nervously fast, at the net, but with any decent, reassuring back-court support, she would have steadied down. Ed's wife had lost her legs and wind in the earlier play with Sally and couldn't come through. Any ball deep in either alley was an automatic point for Weston.

In desperation, Liz dropped back to play from midcourt, which suckered her out of position, and the match ended 2-6, 1-6. Tears in her eyes, she ran quickly to the net to shake hands with the winners and then came over to Al.

"Daddy, will you take me home? I think I'm going to cry."

"Nonsense, Liz. You're a good sport, remember? You played very well. Now I want you to meet Mrs. Dreyer."

"How do you do, Elizabeth. Your father is right. You're an excellent net player. Really."

"I was awful! But, Daddy, if Mrs. Morgan hadn't teamed me—"

"Now, Liz," Al said firmly. "No post-mortems. You know what I mean."

He knew what she wanted to say, and he agreed with her, but it was like a kid coming home from school and raging about the injustice of the teacher. Even if the kid were right, for the kid's own sake, you just couldn't agree openly with him.

He knew one thing. Liz's humiliation resolved any last, lingering doubt about whether he should take the gloves off and go all the way tomorrow night. He had a complete, indigestible bellyful now. A bellyful of Peabottom's pressuring, Jack Lyons' crusading, Sally's heartlessness.

What Housatonic needed, especially when one considered what was happening to clubs these days, was a shock to bring it to its senses, to restore some of its quaint, old-fashioned integrity. Yes, that was precisely the word. Integrity! And he really didn't give a damn what happened to his own Club career in the process.

"You're being awfully silent, Al. Cheer up a little."



"Sorry, Helen. I've gotten into that bad habit somehow. I don't mean to be rude."

"I know that. But why don't you take Liz home? It's been a pretty disappointing day for her. We'll see each other again, won't we?"

"We certainly will, Helen. We certainly will!"

## ► *Chapter Fourteen*

JULY
TUESDAY
12

Traditionally, on alternate months during the summer, in May, July, and September, which correspond to the opening, the high midpoint, and the close of the season, Housatonic's directors dined together in stately formality in the board room before beginning their business meeting.

Dinner was punctually at seven bells, but tonight Al had asked Admissions to report half an hour earlier, at seven o'clock, in the Cellar. Except for Ed and Jon, the committeemen didn't know that the corroboration on Dreyer had come in. Out of common courtesy, he felt he ought to brief them before lowering the boom on Peabottom in the open board meeting.

When all of them had brought their drinks to the table in the far corner, Al raised his glass. "A toast. To ourselves. Maybe after tonight some of us won't be drinking together."

Nick Carnes started to say something, checked himself, and with the others silently raised his glass.

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"All right," Al said. "Dreyer was no good; he *is* no good. We have proof enough. Right, Jon?"

Jon nodded. He told Admissions what his family's friend had relayed to him.

Lyons' face was troubled, but he wouldn't yield. "Let's admit that maybe we have a bad one. We can't pull back now. Remember the wife? Housatonic, our committee, me personally. We'll all be accused of anti-Semitism!"

"He's right, Al," Nick said. "We'll have to make an exception for him."

Al triumphantly slammed his drink down on the table. "I thought some of you bastards would react that way! Dreyer's not an exception. He's the showdown. Let him in because we're yellow and we start the whittling-away process that will let all the Outs in and eventually drive all the Ins out."

"Maybe we could ask him to resign later," Jon suggested. "When he does something here."

Al was silent a moment as Mike served a second round of drinks. He tossed off almost half of his at one gulp and turned toward Jon.

"It takes a lot more guts to force a resignation than to block a wrongo in the beginning. No, Jon, this is our fight, here on Admissions."

Pat McDermott, who had been silent up to now, said, "I'm against the man as a man. Definitely! But without being yellow—and nobody has ever dared accuse me of that!—I think we have to consider some other factors—for the sake of Housatonic itself. Why *does* Dreyer have to be the showdown?"

"Because we start with a very simple, inescapable premise. A club *must* have congenial members with mutual interests, compatible backgrounds, and like manners. Dreyer simply doesn't measure up."

"A very sententious observation," Jack put in. "Like saying good people go to church on Sunday."

"I'll accept that, Jack. But if good people don't go to church, you don't have Christianity. Without the type of members I've described, a club is just not a club. Call it

anything you will. But it's merely an aggregation of people—a Greyhound bus station, a railroad waiting room, an Automat."

Nobody said anything. Al had done his desperate, last-minute best to rally their support. Apparently he'd failed. "Nick, Jack, I don't have to poll you. And Jon warned me earlier that he has no belly for Board fireworks. That leaves Ed and Pat."

"Sorry," Pat said. "Frankly, I think you've got more guts than brains. Must be a little Irish in you, Al."

"Enough." His tone was grim. "Ed?"

"I'm at least halfway with you, Al, but I'll have to play it out by ear."

"All right. Admissions' recommendations should be unanimous, but they don't have to be. So it seems I've lost. Now, in all fairness to you fellows, I should tell you what I intend to do."

Bluntly, he outlined the plan that he had been formulating since Peabottom had given the ultimatum at the meeting with Executive.

"Al, you can't!" Nick's voice was outraged. "You should have warned us. I'm going to tell Peabottom. I tell you right here and now, Al, I'm going to Peabottom!"

"Of course you are, Nick. And that's precisely why I didn't warn you before. You run and tattle to the Commodore Emeritus; it's too late now for him to block me."

McDermott shook his head admiringly. "Didn't know you had it in you, Al. You're sure a go-for-broke guy."

"Thanks, Pat. It's almost seven bells. You fellows go along into the board room. Frankly, I need to fortify myself with one more."

At the bimonthly dinners, not only the Club tie but also the Club blazer, white ducks, and bucks were obligatory. When Al came in five minutes later, having gulped down a third Scotch and carrying a fourth drink with him, the long conference table presented a splendidly salty spectacle.

A fine body of men, he thought to himself, give or take a few landlubbers who looked and must have felt pretty silly in marine getup. Also give or take a few bastards and weak-

► *Tuesday, July 12*

lings, he added. He noticed that Nick was in an agitated, whispered conference with Peabottom and Will Archer.

Let 'em whisper! Let 'em plot! Al felt the exhilaration of coming battle and settled down to enjoy the dinner, which was usually fun.

The food was always first-rate, because the chef knew he was cooking for the mighty men of Housatonic, especially the House Chairman, his immediate boss. The chef wanted to ingratiate himself with the Board from whom any blessings, in the form of a bonus, a raise, or a promotion, must flow, and on his behalf the rest of the help industriously caves-dropped.

But in the past, garbled snatches of conversation reported by Abe, the waiter, had relayed considerable misinformation to the chef and his fellow workers, adversely affecting their morale. So now the directors remained prudently silent or talked only in resounding generalities while Abe was in the room.

Lyons, facing the door, shot a warning glance around the table as it opened noiselessly and Abe quietly entered, far more quietly than simple good service called for.

"Yes, I was in Minorca last season," Jack said casually. "The natives are simply wonderful. But like everywhere else, of course, the tourists are spoiling it."

Al, now well along on his fourth Scotch, felt relieved that he need no longer be restrained by political considerations. Jack was lost anyhow, and the fellow was such an ass, such a typical liberal snob, that he wanted to tick him off.

"What's the matter with tourists?" he demanded. "Aren't they people, too?"

"You know what I mean, Al. Those impossible midwestern schoolteachers and that whole middle-middle-class mob running around with their Kodaks and movie cameras."

Al did know what he meant, but he wouldn't concede anything.

"And also running around with good hard American dollars. Thanks to them, a lot of very picturesque and ignorant natives all over the world are being spoiled, all right. Spoiled

right into the twentieth century. And what do the tourists get for it? They get taken right and left and are sneered at back home."

"You're absolutely right!" Henry Silliman said. "It all goes back to the New Deal, I always say, and that traitor to his own class. For thirty years we've been Uncle Sap to the world."

"And how do you feel about Eleanor?" Ed Abernathy asked mischievously.

Henry made a strangled noise.

"Quickest way to tell a man's politics is to ask him, even at this late date, how he felt about Eleanor," Ed said. "If she was a gracious, charming Lady Bountiful, loved the niggers, loved the Jews, obviously the fellow's a Democrat. On the other hand, thinking men like Henry here get a little nervous every Hallowe'en that she's going to ride again."

"I find nothing amusing in the Roosevelts—the whole damned family," Henry replied.

"You're being a little harsh," Jon Winston interjected. "I like to think that I take the moderate, middle-of-the-road point of view toward Eleanor. She was merely the nation's mother-in-law, sticking her nose into everybody else's business."

"Amen!" Pat McDermott said roundly. "She belonged at home at Sixteen Hundred Pennsylvania Avenue with her husband and the kids."

"Don't forget one thing, gentlemen," Lyons said. "People talked the same way about one of your sainted Republicans—Lincoln."

Peabottom blew his nose commandingly. There was immediate, respectful silence. "We must get the meeting started, as soon as Abe cleans up the table."

Al wondered detachedly why the I-hate-Roosevelt mystique had endured so stubbornly so long after their deaths. He was a conservative, himself, but still this continual harping on Franklin and Eleanor was plain ghoulish. The only reason he could think of was that hating Roosevelts, dead as well as alive, had become another badge of upper-middle-class status.

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When the last of the dishes had been cleared away and the door firmly closed on Abe, Will Archer gaveled for order. Peabottom immediately took over.

"I have a happy announcement, gentlemen. As he has done so often in the past, Housatonic's good friend, Henry Silliman, has come to our aid. He has taken responsibility for our mortgage, and Housatonic is guaranteed clear sailing, at least through this season and next. Gentlemen, I ask for a rising vote of thanks to Henry!"

As the directors rose, Ed Abernathy, in a loud baritone, started *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*, and the others joined in raggedly. Henry bowed and smiled graciously.

"And my deep personal thanks," Peabottom added, with a withering glance at Archer. He wasn't going to let poor Will forget for a moment. "You got us out of a bad hole, one that rightly we shouldn't have gotten into in the first place. And now, Will, you were going to say something?"

"Of course, Commodore. May we have the Secretary's report?"

"Move that we dispense with the reading," Peabottom said.

After Nick's dutiful second, there was a relieved chorus of Ayes.

"The Treasurer?"

Again Peabottom intervened. For some reason, the old fellow was hurrying the meeting along. "After just hearing the good news, any further financial discussion would be redundant, I believe."

He chuckled heavily. "Unless Henry is worried about his investment and wants to know the details."

"Ha! Less I hear the better."

"Fine! Fine!" Archer said. "We can get to the committees now."

Al braced himself. Alphabetically, Admissions came first. But Peabottom leaned over to whisper in Archer's ear, and Will carefully avoided looking toward Al.

"Yes, of course. We'll start with Beach."

Something was up, all right. Al could only wait.

"I've been asked to report for the chairman, who couldn't

attend tonight," Joe Amory said. "Only one item. We've had to fire Georgie, the beach boy."

"That pleasant young Negro chap?" Lyons put in quickly. "Why?"

"We got a number of complaints. He didn't clean the beach properly. A bit arrogant, too."

"Do you think, in view of everything, it was wise to fire him?"

Amory's tone was almost insultingly laconic. "Depends, I suppose, on whether you think we hired him as a beach boy or as a Negro."

Will Archer gaveled. "Come, gentlemen. We have other committees to hear from."

Except for Jack's tedious account of Ladies' Tennis the day before, the reports were all mercifully short and non-controversial. Then the chair made a short announcement.

"I took the liberty to check in advance with the other committee directors," Archer said. "Except for Admissions, none has any business of importance to report, so I beg to be excused. I feel a touch of migraine coming on. Commodore Peabottom, will you kindly chair the rest of the meeting?"

Gutless, Al thought disgustedly. Peabottom put him up to this so that he could personally take over for the showdown on the Dreyers. "A point of order, Mr. Commodore."

"Yes, Al."

"With both the Vice and the Rear present, I challenge the right of the Commodore to designate any other presiding officer. The chair descends in the order of succession."

"I waive," said the Vice.

"I waive," said the Rear.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

"I don't believe constitutional responsibilities can be waived," Al said dryly, "and I will put my objection in the form of a motion. I move that this Board respectfully request that, so long as he is in attendance at this meeting, the Vice Commodore take over as presiding officer. And that, if he wishes to be excused from the remainder of the meeting, the

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Rear Commodore shall chair unless he also wishes to be excused."

If anybody supports me, Al thought, we'll get rid of two Peabottom men with one motion. But around the table there was silence. Peabottom nudged Archer.

"Oh, yes," Will said nervously. "Do I hear a second?"

Again there was silence.

"The motion fails for lack of a seconder, Mr. Commodore Emeritus, it is my pleasure to hand over the gavel to you."

Peabottom adjusted his bulk into the presiding chair. He gavelled authoritatively and glanced slowly around the table, making his presence felt by the confident deliberation of his movements. His eyes fastened on Al.

"I noticed, Al, that you were patronizing the bar earlier," he said in fatherly tones. "Now, you aren't going to be pig-headed for the rest of the evening, are you?"

The tolerant condescension stung Al. "I recognize, sir, the delicate allusion to my grandmother."

"Why, Al!"

"You know why Uncle Ben always sneered at my mother! The two of you sat together on this Board long enough. She was part Irish, and that was too much for broad, liberal, tolerant, lovable Ben—your friend."

"Please, Al."

But Al was finishing his fifth Scotch and he wasn't pleasing anyone tonight. "Unfortunately, Commodore, if you have a little Irish in you—you have a lot."

"Racial discussions have no place at a board meeting. Nor do unkind references to the dead."

"He's right, Al," Pat McDermott put in. "And I'm not one to back away from defending the Irish."

"*Et tu*, McDermott! I'm not discussing race. I'm discussing a heel."

There was a moment of strained silence. Then the Commodore Emeritus made a gracious gesture toward the Secretary. "All the foregoing, of course, and what I am about to say, are not part of the record. This has been merely a preliminary discussion of the committee of the whole. I think



we can safely assume that Al is not quite himself tonight. Therefore, I will take the liberty of reporting to you that both Admissions and Executive have unanimously approved two couples for membership—Dr. Carmichael and his wife, most charming people, whom I know personally; and the Johnstones, whom I do not know but who come adequately recommended."

He pawed through the papers in front of him and extracted two manila folders. "The dossiers, gentlemen. Would you care to peruse them?"

"What's this talk that this Dr. Carmichael is, or intends to be, a psychiatrist?" Joe Amory asked, his voice tinged with suspicion. "Some of my best friends are psychiatrists, but none of them is a Christian."

"My dear Joe, I have just described the couple as most charming. Your apprehensions are quite groundless. Any other questions? Henry? I believe I know what you have in mind. In due time, my friend." He paused.

"No other questions? I will entertain a motion that the Carmichaels and the Johnstones be accepted for membership in Housatonic Yacht and Tennis."

Correctly, he looked toward Al, as Admissions Chairman, to make the motion. Al remained silent. The beady old eyes bored into Al's for a moment, then flickered toward Nick.

"So move, Commodore. I so move."

There was a chorus of seconds.

"All those in favor say Aye. Do I hear any Nays? The motion is carried."

The old man took out his handkerchief, blew his nose meditatively, and hitched his chair forward. "Now, to what I believe Henry had in mind. Quite properly. The confounded delay over my new associate, Joseph Dreyer, and his more than charming young wife, Helen. Unfortunately, I cannot report to you that their candidacy was presented to, and approved by, Executive. *Therefore, I now ask Admissions for a recommendation on the Dreyers.*"

Al said nothing.

"Al, I demand the report!"

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Al remained silent.

"Due to the apparent inability of the Chairman to report, I ask you, Nick, to make a recommendation on behalf of Admissions."

"Well, Commodore, I don't quite know what to say. I mean to say, this is all a bit irregular—"

"Nick!" There was the crack of authority in the old man's voice.

"Yes, Commodore. On behalf of Admissions, I move acceptance of the Dreyers. A very fine couple. Very interested in sailing, you know."

"That will do nicely, Nick. We accept the recommendation of Admissions as delivered by the Acting Chairman. I call for a second and a vote. You second, Jack? Fine. And now for the vote, gentlemen."

Al's voice was flat. "Just a minute, sir!"

"Yes, Al?"

"You've forgotten something."

"Indeed?"

"That beautifully hand-worked machine of solid mahogany that reposes on the mantel behind you."

"But, Al!" Nick was horrified.

"That's just a—a relic!"

Al ignored him, looking slowly up and down the table, trying to size up each director for the last time, trying to calculate who might support him.

Pat McDermott and Jon Winston, those opposites, squirmed uncomfortably. For totally different reasons, they deplored trouble. Joe Amory, veteran of many an Admissions fight in his day as Chairman, looked quizzical, almost amused. Ed Abernathy didn't bother to conceal the grin on his face. Henry Silliman was apoplectic.

"Mr. Commodore! This is unheard of! In all my years on this Board, I have never seen that machine used!"

"Quite right, Henry. The machine is just a conversation piece left over from the old days. We never use the—the, uh—"

Al looked Peabottom levelly in the eyes. "Let's not be fas-

tidious, sir. It has only one name. The *blackball* machine. I now stand on my rights as a Director. I demand that it be passed around the table."

"Rinehart!" Ed Abernathy suddenly yelled.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I beg yours, Commodore. A private Harvard joke. Very much like the carnival workers yelling 'Hey, Rubel' when a riot breaks out."

"This is hardly the moment for levity. Do I hear any objections to the request before us?"

Al caught him up sharply. "You know perfectly well, sir, that under the bylaws no appeal, no overriding vote, can be taken against such a demand by even a single director. I say, *Pass the machine.*"

For a moment, there was absolute silence. Everyone looked toward Peabottom. Grudgingly, he nodded. The Secretary rose, lifted the machine from the mantel, and handed it ceremoniously to the Commodore Emeritus.

It looked almost like a small portable cash register. The front, narrow in depth at the top, bellied out in a semicircle down to a little tray that pulled open like a drawer. The back was flat, with a hole in it large enough for a man's hand and wrist.

Without anyone else being able to see how he was voting, a Director could insert his hand, find a white or black ball, and drop it into the back of the tray. When the machine got back around the table to the chair, he would open the tray and announce the results.

"Pass the machine," Al repeated.

With embarrassed glances at each other, the directors took turns inserting their hands, then hastily withdrawing them and handing on the machine to the man on the right.

The machine got back to Peabottom. Slowly, he opened the tray. Sweat started on his forehead.

"This is unforgivable! There's one blackball here."

"I'm sorry, sir," Al said. "But you forced the showdown. And you know the rules. One blackball requires discussion and a second vote. Now I'm going to talk."

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Bluntly, he laid it on the line about Dreyer's behavior before and after his marriage, his drinking, his chasing. Without identifying the source, he even threw in Dr. Carmichael's prognosis.

"Gossip! Malicious rumor! Psychiatry! I'm appalled!" Old Peabottom was thundering now as though he were giving a summation to a jury. "What you say is *actionable*, man! If the Club weren't involved, I'd recommend that Joe Dreyer sue you. You have taken advantage of a gentleman, sir."

Al's voice was even flatter than it had been earlier. "You know the rules better than I, Commodore. Pass the machine again."

Nick Carnes blurted, "But, Al! Now if there are two blackballs, the application is automatically suspended for six months!"

Most of the others were talking at once, but Joe Amory kept out of it. Maybe, Al hoped, as a former Admissions chairman himself, he would feel some loyalty to his successor. Except for Ed, his own committeemen averted their eyes from him. Ed glanced toward him almost admiringly. Maybe there would be a supporting blackball there, too.

Anyhow, he couldn't back down now. He had to bull through, hoping that one or the other or both would come through for him. "Pass the machine!"

Again there was the embarrassed little ceremony. When Peabottom opened the tray, he was suddenly a deflated old man. He started to say something, then choked. Mutely, he held up two little black balls.

Pat McDermott loudly broke the silence. "Well, that settles it! God, this business reminds me of the Ku Klux Klan. There's something dirty about blackballing."

"It's not quite settled, Pat. I want the machine passed for the third time, in accordance with the bylaws."

From all sides came an indignant babble of protests.

"What more do you want—blood?"

"You've blocked him, haven't you?"

"Three blackballs would be a flat rejection!"

"Gives a man practically a criminal record. No other club would take him after that."

Peabottom gaveled for order. "Do you realize what you're doing, man? At least be gentleman enough to allow the sponsor to withdraw the application."

As in most clubs, Housatonic's directors served terms that were staggered so that there was always an overlapping of experience. Al's own "class" was ending its three-year term this season, and, while courtesy called for the renomination of those who wanted it, Nominating could do as it pleased.

"Withdraw the application? So that you and Paul Ling can reactivate it—in case I'm no longer on the Board next year? I want this thing settled once and for all!"

Pat, Nick, Jack Lyons were definitely lost. Al stared heavily at Amory and Abernathy. One of them must have given him the second blackball. Now, desperately, he needed the third. Their faces were blank.

Up and down the long table, all the eyes were fixed on his—trying to stare him back into line, it seemed. He turned to Peabottom. "Pass the machine, sir."

Slowly, agonizingly, the gleaming, lethal little thing of beauty circled the table and eventually got back to Peabottom.

The old man yanked the tray out so nervously that the balls spilled onto the floor. On his hands and knees, the Secretary retrieved them, placing them up on the table one by one.

White . . .

White . . .

Black . . .

White . . .

White . . .

A second black . . .

White . . .

White . . .

White . . .

*The third black!*

► *Wednesday, July 13*

Al let out an exhalation that seemed to come all the way from the soles of his feet. "Admissions, sir, has no further report to make. I beg to be excused from the remainder of the meeting."

Peabottom nodded dully. Al almost felt sorry for him, but his own retribution would be coming soon enough. In his moment of triumph, he walked out almost like a beaten man. Nobody looked at him. Nobody followed.

► *Chapter Fifteen*

JULY
WEDNESDAY
13

Al awoke half an hour earlier than usual, feeling logy and emotionally drained.

Almost since Opening Day, he had been working toward last night's showdown on Dreyer, and now that the curtain had been rung down on the sad little comedy, he, Al Babcock, the hero, could live happily ever after.

Suddenly, all the unanswered corollary problems and questions that had been overshadowed by the Dreyer business flooded his mind. The play was far from over. This was only the intermission before Act Three.

He glanced toward the other twin bed. Jean was still asleep. Hastily, he reached over to turn off the alarm on their bedside clock radio. He tiptoed into the bathroom and gulped down a couple of aspirin for the dull headache.

Quietly, he placed his razor, brush, and tube of lather in

his father's ornately painted and monogrammed shaving mug. He returned to the bedroom, gathered up his clothes, and went down the hall to the little guest bathroom where he could shave, shower, and dress without rousing the rest of the family.

He badly needed a stinging, ice-cold spray, then two cups of hot black coffee—and half an hour of blessed solitude!—to face up to Act Three.

No use worrying about the damage done to his insurance business by the Dreyer mess. That was irretrievable. He would get no more leads from Peabottom, Hardy & Ling.

All he could do—and he'd get Agnes, his secretary, started on it right away—was to list all his own clients whose legal business was handled by Peabottom, Hardy & Ling. Then he would call personally on each of them, recementing his contacts. He wouldn't put it past Peabottom and Paul Ling to try to steer away business if they could—and old Hardy would have been in there trying, too, except that he was dead.

Now, what about the Club? Was his career really washed up? Was Uncle Ben, six feet under, if not all the way down where he properly belonged, going to have the last, malicious laugh?

There were, it seemed, two possibilities. The first he wanted to reject without consideration, but, being a prudent man as well as a fighter, he did not do so. This course involved pulling the right strings, if he could find them, to effect some kind of *rapprochement* with Peabottom. It would be a humiliating and probably futile effort, but there would attach to it certain tactical advantages which he couldn't ignore.

Secondly, he could launch an all-out frontal assault on the old man and, being a close student of Housatonic's constitution and bylaws, he thought he knew the only way to go about it. The tactic, rarer than blackballing in a club that lived so serenely under dictatorship, required strong supporting troops. Before committing himself, he would have to reconnoiter carefully, especially in view of the damned feeble support he had received last night.

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But problem *numero uno* had to be settled forthwith, in the next few hours, before news of Dreyer's blackballing spread all over town and got back to Jean. How was he going to make her see that he'd done only what he had had to do as a man?

The cold shower, the refreshing sting of after-shave lotion made him feel better, and as he dressed, defiantly wearing the Club tie as though going forth to battle, he felt almost strong enough for Act Three.

A couple of hot, black, quiet mugs of coffee, then he'd drive down to the office and call Jean from there before any of the employees arrived and could eavesdrop. Anything to avoid a face-to-face scene with her so early in the morning.

He went quietly downstairs to the kitchen. Jean was waiting for him.

"I assumed you'd wake me when you got in last night," she said crossly.

"There really wasn't any reason to."

"Of course there was! You know I'm interested in the Dreyers, on account of Liz. What happened?"

Al hesitated.

"Now, don't tell me pompously that what goes on at board meetings is completely confidential—please! Everybody in the Club knew the Dreyer candidacy was coming up last night."

"It isn't that, Jean. I just don't quite know how to explain."

"You mean, more delay? Sally will be furious. So will all the right people. Can't you control your own committee, Al? We'll be laughingstocks."

"I'm afraid it's more serious than that, Jean."

Her tone was suddenly apprehensive. "What do you mean?"

Again he hesitated, groping for the word, the phrase, the sentence that would somehow make her see his side. With all the words in the English language, enough to fill great big dictionaries, there just weren't enough damned words for the job.

"I blackballed him," he blurted.

"You what?"



"He's no damned good, Jean. He doesn't belong in the Club. I blackballed him. Two fellows backed me up."

"What does that mean?"

"You might as well face it. He's dead at Housatonic—forever."

"But—but—I never heard of such a thing!"

"It hasn't happened in years and years, not since my beloved Uncle Ben blackballed a Catholic."

"Al, oh, please, Al! Don't joke with me. This is too serious. For Liz's sake, for my sake. For yours. What really did happen?"

"I told you. I blackballed him. Goddammit, that's all there is to it! I didn't do it out of prejudice or to spite anybody. I did it for the Club."

"Al Babcock, if you mean what you say, you're out of your mind. Stark, raving mad."

"I mean it, and I wish you'd let me explain. I shouldn't—it is confidential Club business—but I want my own wife to understand. Please? I think you'd really be proud of me."

She shook her head dully. "All the explanations in the world won't undo the harm."

"It will all blow over. Uncle Ben wasn't very popular for a while, but he survived, didn't he?"

"Blow over! You've *ruined* us socially."

"Don't be so melodramatic, Jean. I know I've made enemies. Maybe they can hurt me in business and at the Club. What else can they do? We're Ins."

"You are plain, downright stupid. Let's start with Sally. I'm sure she wasn't personally interested in the Dreyers. Peabottom put her up to it. But she supported them right down the line; she committed her prestige. How do you think she's going to feel?"

"You can tell her from me that—for good and sufficient reason, involving character—I acted only as I had to act."

"Who cares about the man's character? Certainly not Sally. She has been publicly humiliated. That's the important thing. She can only assume, that, after we received Liz's invitation, I double-crossed her. Thank God we do have the invitation!"

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Al sighed. "I'd almost forgotten that drill was coming up. One more problem."

"You talk about problems! They haven't even started! I know what's going to happen. I've seen it."

"Like what?"

"Like Sally and the Old Guard not inviting me to any more luncheons or teas. From there, the freeze-out will spread gradually. I'll go to the annual Garden Club meeting and find I'm sitting at the smallest table near the kitchen with either the newest member or the oldest, deafest one. Then one day they'll 'forget' to notify me that my own committee is meeting at Housatonic's Hospice for Little Wanderers. Al, we'll be untouchables!"

"You make it sound like smallpox, scarlet fever, some communicable disease."

"Worse. Venereal disease."

"Well, if I'm considered the carrier, I could settle that little problem for you. Just leave for a while."

"Oh no, you don't! Not now. One hint of scandal would be all the excuse they'd need to *withdraw* Liz's invitation. Haven't you done enough damage to her already?"

"What do you want from me?"

"I don't know. I'll—I'll put your things in the guest room for the time being."

"Fine!"

Al had no taste for coffee after all. He just wanted to get away from Jean. He'd go to the office, put his feet up on the desk, and brood quietly till Agnes Meredith and the rest of the staff reported at eight-thirty. He started for the door.

"One more thing, Al."

"Now what?"

"The children. There will have to be some explanation about why you are sleeping in the guest room. They'll wonder."

"Tell them what you want."

"That's your job. You're the one who is moving."

"All right. I'll tell them I've got a cold, or something."

"They're too old to be fooled by that. They know we've

been arguing a lot. You'd better think of some nice way of telling them the truth."

"For God's sake, Jean! The Secretary of State himself couldn't do that. But I'll try. Tonight. Now I've got to get downtown."

In the self-destructive way of the male motorist, Al released all his frustrations through his right foot, on the long straightaway into the city.

Doing sixty-five, he couldn't brake as the light ahead suddenly went green—yellow—red, and then he heard the cop's whistle. He stopped the Buick half a block further on.

"Say, you! Oh, Mr. Babcock."

It was Joe O'Brien, the chief's son, often a special officer at Club parties. "You should have stopped when I whistled."

"To give you an honest answer, Joe, I'm afraid I was going too fast to stop. I'm sorry."

"Speeding and passing a red light, Mr. Babcock. There'd better be a good excuse."

"The best."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You married, Joe?"

"Yeah."

"Well?"

"Oh. Yeah. All right. This time. But please take it easy, Mr. Babcock. The school kids are out."

"Thanks, Joe. I appreciate it."

A little thing, beating a ticket, but maybe an omen. As he drove on at a sedate forty-five, a line kept running through his mind, one that Kate, his grandmother, used to quote when he was a kid worrying about exams at school. Chirrupy, yet the message was there.

*But the man worthwhile is the man who can smile when everything goes dead wrong.*

At the office, Al wasted no time feeling sorry for himself. He got out the Club roster and read the names, from Abernathy to Young, of all the active members, the only ones entitled to vote in Housatonic. He concentrated on those with seniority numbers of 100 and lower, the ones who

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went way back, the ones he knew the best. Beside each he penciled a V, an X, or a question mark.

When he totted up the columns, there were twenty-five V's, representing friends he felt reasonably sure he could rely on; as many X's for the Peabottom men, and fifty undecideds. It wasn't too promising.

Miss Meredith came in with a trayful of letters.

"You've been letting your correspondence pile up," she said reproachfully.

Al had inherited her from his father, so there was between them that protective mother-son relationship that exists with aging spinster secretaries and younger bosses. It was a little annoying, but when he considered the fact that she really ran the agency, he had to accept it.

"I'm sorry, Agnes. But I'll have to let the stuff ride another day or so. Something has come up."

"But, Mr. Babcock! There are three very important letters."

"Let me see them."

He scanned them quickly. As usual, Miss Meredith was right.

"You win, Agnes. There's something I want you to do, but get your dictation pad and we'll get rid of these first."

"I have it right here, Mr. Babcock."

He dictated quickly, almost carelessly, aware of her tactful editing as they went along. "Maybe you can let the typing go till after lunch. I'll be out all afternoon. Just sign my name and mail them. What I need fast is a list of all our clients who are also clients of Peabottom, Hardy & Ling."

"That will take time, Mr. Babcock."

"I know, Agnes, and you're the only one in the office who would really know. Besides, this is confidential."

"Mr. Babcock! Everything in this office is considered confidential by all of us. Why, I wouldn't dream of hiring even a messenger boy who wasn't completely trustworthy."

"I'm sorry, Agnes. I didn't mean it that way. It's just that this is superconfidential, and you're the one I trust most. Oh, and one other thing. Will you please put in calls for Mr. Amory and Mr. Abernathy?"

He was rechecking the roster when she returned five minutes later.

"Mr. Amory will not be in until some time late in the day. Mr. Abernathy will be out all day. He is described as ill."

Her tone was skeptical. Miss Meredith was a practicing Prohibitionist, and she always suspected the worst of men with reputations like Ed's. Men who *drank*. That quality of Alvin's worried her, too, because what went on weekends at Housatonic Yacht and Tennis was common knowledge around town.

Years before, Miss Meredith had had a young girl's crush on Alvin's father, and she couldn't help contrasting the two. Dear, dear Mr. Babcock had been the perfect gentleman; imperturbable, considerate, easygoing, and she seriously doubted that, except at weddings and christenings, he drank anything stronger than madeira or sherry—bad enough, the good Lord knew, but not to be compared with this wild swilling of *cocktails*.

Alvin was different. He was a gentleman, of course, but he had his ups and downs and lately he had seemed moody, tense, withdrawn. This summer he had even been careless about his office responsibilities. Maybe it was the liquor; maybe, and more probably, that wife of his. Miss Meredith had never liked Jean. Though she didn't aspire to the Babcocks' social circle, she was native Housatonic and she still considered Jean somewhat new.

"And, Mr. Babcock. From memory, I jotted down some names. Probably our oldest client, who is also represented by Peabottom, Hardy & Ling, is Dr. McDonald. And then—"

"Get me the doctor right away, please. Before he's swallowed alive on his hospital rounds."

"Certainly, sir."

Though the Carmichaels had certainly posed no problems to Admissions, Dr. McDonald now expressed to Al a proper, almost deferential gratitude in their behalf.

It was touchingly old-fashioned, Al thought. The attitude of many of the younger members was that Housatonic was

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damned lucky to get whatever candidates they saw fit to sponsor.

"Not at all, Doctor. Housatonic is in your debt for bringing us such a charming couple. Unfortunately, at the moment all the sponsors are not quite so pleased, and I'm in trouble. Could we have lunch? . . . No, not at the Club. How about the Businessmen's Club?"

Dr. McDonald made a distressed sound, indicating that he found little intellectual stimulation there.

"I know it isn't old Housatonic City of blessed memory, Doctor. But we can get a table with some privacy. . . . Twelve-thirty? Thank you, Doctor."

Due to his advancing years and to the blessed discretion of the newfangled but nondetectable vodka, Dr. McDonald now permitted himself one cocktail at noon. As he sipped, Al frankly told him the whole Dreyer story. After all, he was the Babcock family doctor; he had been a friend of his father's, and Al felt no reservations.

Dr. McDonald nodded sadly. "I simply can't imagine Judge Peabottom being taken in by a bounder. We're all getting along, I guess, and it's a different world today, Al. The old code was narrow, maybe too strict, I sometimes think. But not many of these fellows slipped through. What can I do?"

This was the difficult part. Al had to swallow his pride. "Commodore Peabottom lives by the old code, sir. I know that he is your friend, but I feel his interpretation is—Mosaic. An eye for an eye. In his opinion, I injured him, and now I must receive my just desserts."

"How?"

"Well, this may sound petty to you, sir, and I'd feel too embarrassed to mention it to almost anyone else. In Club advancement."

"That does sound a bit petty, Al."

"I know—but I've put in a lot of sweat, worry, and money for Housatonic, and Judge Peabottom will see to it that I don't go back on the Board. It's so damned unfair! Unjust desserts, really!"

Unexpectedly, Dr. McDonald laughed. "You remind me of your grandmother. A delightful woman. And, like the Irish, always fighting mad over an injustice, real or fancied, to anyone. Matter of fact, we Scots are that way, too. That's why I sympathize."

"I never noticed much sympathy between the Scots and the Irish."

"Oh, the two growl at each other over religion. But don't forget, my boy, they share the same Celtic burden—England. That's why they're oversensitized. They have an allergy, really, on the subject of justice."

"I assumed that the 'Mc' meant you were Irish, probably Northern Ireland."

"I suppose it should be 'Mac,' but the 'a' probably got lost at Ellis Island. But definitely not *Macdonald*. The small-'d' Macdonalds are very kilty, lairds of the isles, that sort of thing. We were definitely poor. We digress. What are you asking me to do, Al?"

"What I have in mind," Al said slowly, "would be a great personal favor. I wouldn't ask it if I didn't also sincerely think that the good of the Club were involved. I want to find out if there is any possibility of patching things up, and I can't very well do it directly."

Dr. McDonald's face wrinkled fastidiously. "Isn't that what the politicians call putting out a feeler? I'm not much good at that sort of thing."

"Couldn't Ted do it on behalf of both of you?"

"My son? Why Ted?"

"As Treasurer, he has Peabottom's respect. It would be very natural for a Director to express his feelings. If you will allow me, I'll call Ted this afternoon."

The old man brightened. "That won't be necessary. He's dining with us tonight. I think it's a fine idea, as long as I personally don't have to start electioneering at my age. Ted likes you, there'll be no problem."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"Only, mind you! I can't guarantee results. Judge Pea-

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bottom is a very stubborn man, even when it comes to following his doctor's orders."

Regretfully but firmly, Dr. McDonald declined a second cocktail, saying that he had to start on his office appointments before two o'clock.

Al decided against mentioning the possibility that Peabottom's firm might try to raid his clients. The good doctor would rightly resent business talk coupled with a request for a personal favor. Anyhow, thank heaven, McDonald was one of that vanishing breed who, having once made up their minds about their insurance man, tailor, grocer, or liquor store, would remain stubbornly loyal despite all the blandishments of advertising, cut prices, and trading stamps.

When they parted, Al studied the client list Miss Meredith had prepared for him. She had thoughtfully grouped them by addresses so that there would be no wasted time. He obviously couldn't discuss his suspicions with the clients, and so each call was brief, casual, a showing of the flag.

*Was A. Babcock & Son servicing them satisfactorily? Anything he personally could do? No, no, not trying to sell a damned thing. Just passing by and thought he'd drop in.*

At four o'clock he had almost completed the list and gave up for the day. From experience he knew that clients and prospects didn't like being disturbed between eight-thirty and nine-thirty, when they were organizing their day, or from four o'clock on, when they were trying to clean up last-minute details before their employees stampeded out promptly at five.

Listening to the news on the car radio, he started to drive back to the office. Some big antitrust suit was being tried in federal court up in New Haven. The local announcer gave it unnecessary prominence because the defendant corporation was being represented by attorney Joseph Dreyer, of Housatonic's own distinguished law firm of Peabottom, Hardy & Ling.

Impulsively, Al pulled up alongside a public phone booth at a street corner and called Miss Meredith. "I don't think I'll



bother coming back, Agnes. You'll send out those three letters? Any calls for me?"

Miss Meredith's voice was faintly reproachful. Dammit, Al thought, she always makes me feel as though I'm playing hookey.

"Mr. Amory returned your call. He said that if the matter was urgent you could reach him between five and six at the Businessmen's Club. At the bar."

"Thank you, Agnes. I'll probably call him later tonight—from home."

Al started to look up Helen's number, then put the directory back in the rack. He didn't know why, exactly, but he wanted to see her. With her husband away, she'd probably refuse if he called first. He'd just drop in unannounced.

As he parked outside the small ranch house set in a large, nicely landscaped plot, he almost lost his nerve. He had to force himself to walk up the flagstone walk and ring the bell.

Helen was coolly attractive in a white sharkskin sailor dress trimmed with blue braids. "Why, Al Babcock! What a pleasant surprise! What brings you here?"

He hoped the lie wasn't completely transparent. "Just happened to be in the neighborhood on business, and I suddenly decided I'd stop by. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. Come in."

She led him into the living room, bright and cheerful, "Modern," but still soft: neither glaring nor angular. Though he was a traditionalist, Al approved. This room wasn't modern for the sake of being modern, it was what he considered a rarity: good-taste modern.

On the low Italian coffee table with white marble top, her arrangement of red roses stood out vividly, and the modernistic squidjums on the walls added more color, but not confusion. Al found the décor a refreshing contrast to the heavier, Victorian atmosphere of his own home and told her so.

"You really like it, Al?"

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"Delightful."

Much as he had wanted to see her, he didn't quite know what to talk about. She sensed his embarrassment and laughed.

Now that he had paid her the compliment of a visit, she felt confident, relaxed with him, and she expressed her pleasure by gently teasing him.

"You look as though you want to tell me something, but don't know how to start. I'll make it easy. May I please buy some life insurance, sir?"

"Not that, Helen. I didn't come on business. It never entered my mind."

She laughed again. "You mean I'm a bad risk?"

"Stop teasing. Honestly, I just wanted to say hello."

"Of course. I'm perking a pot of coffee. Won't you have a cup with me?"

"Is it, well, proper with your husband away?"

"You *are* old-fashioned! Maybe it isn't, but—to be candid—I don't give a damn. Joe's been up in New Haven all week on some case or other. I can't say I miss him, but I'm lonely."

She was surprised at herself for talking so frankly, but it wasn't come-hither; she felt it was an honest statement, one friend to another.

Al felt relieved. If Dryer had been gone all week, neither he nor Helen probably knew yet about the blackballing. And he couldn't tell her. Protocol demanded that neither Flag officers nor directors get themselves involved in such sticky business. It was entirely the sponsors' jobs to impart the unhappy confidence to rejected candidates.

Oh, tell yourself the truth, Babcock! Even though she really doesn't care about the Club, you just haven't got the guts to tell her.

"Al, you're going into one of those silences."

"Sorry, Helen. I've had so many things on my mind. Guess some of the mental cogs are beginning to wear smooth."

"The coffee will do you good. Come along to the break-

fast nook. I want to show you what I've done with philodendron."

He hesitated, and she laughed. "Oh, it's perfectly proper. The curtains are drawn back, and I'll even put a light on if you insist."

In the breakfast nook, Helen had hung pots of philodendron from brackets at each corner of the ceiling and then trained the long, trailing, leafy runners to meet so that they almost covered the ceiling. The effect was startling.

In spite of himself, Al contrasted Jean, a good, efficient, but totally unimaginative housekeeper, with this woman. Helen was creative.

"How the devil do you water the things?" he asked.

"Just stand on a chair, silly."

"Oh, that's right, I suppose. Say, this coffee is good! Reminds me of the Navy. In these days of instant everything, brewing good coffee is a dying art."

"Thank you. Another cup?"

He glanced at his wrist watch. "I'd love it. But I have a fellow waiting for me at the Businessmen's Club. I'll have to run."

At the door, he felt a sudden, almost irresistible urge to take her in his arms, to crush her against him. She sensed it, and she wanted him to. Momentarily, she had the panic-stricken look of a small girl.

Then she drew back, even though she knew she would be sorry that she hadn't let him, and extended her hand. "It's been fun, Al. I've enjoyed seeing you. Do come again."

There was a brisk note of dismissal in her voice. Al took her hand and squeezed it impulsively. Then he hurried down the flagstone walk without looking back.

Joe Amory was just finishing a drink at the bar when Al joined him. Al ordered two Scotches and led Joe to the same secluded table where he had lunched with Dr. McDonald.

"First, Joe, my profound thanks."

"For what?"

"For the second, or third, ball, last night."

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"Now, wait a minute! Never thank a man for a black-ball. I might deny it. I certainly won't affirm it."

"I won't press you. And I certainly won't say anything to anyone else."

"You said 'first.' What's second on your mind?"

"I want your advice on where I go from here."

"You want it frankly, with the bark off?"

"Of course."

"As long as Peabottom runs things, you're washed up at Housatonic. I'm sorry. It isn't fair, but there it is."

"Suppose I tell you I've put out a feeler to see if the old man won't soften up?"

"Won't do any good, I'm afraid. And it's basically bad tactics. Looks like weakness, appeasement."

"I'm just trying to clear the air. Satisfy my own conscience in case I have to fall back on a plan I have in mind."

"And what's the plan?"

"I don't want to go into details yet. It's all spelled out in Article Five, Section Two of the constitution."

"Hell, I'm no sea lawyer. I haven't memorized the constitution."

"Read it when you get home, and just think about it. Will you do that much, Joe?"

"All right. But if my suspicions are correct, I won't promise to go along with you. You did the right thing, I admit. For which you are now being punished. From your point of view, it's unfair."

"You're damned right it's unfair!"

"From your point of view, I said. I have to look at it from the Club's point of view—what's best for the Club. And I don't want to see a lot of politicking, maybe an open row. That sort of thing destroys clubs."

"So I should quietly cut my throat for the sake of old Housatonic?"

"You were in the Navy. You remember the PT boats. They were expendable. Very rough, personally, on the men. But the war had to be fought that way."

"This is civilian life."

"Which sometimes is war without the shooting. All I'm saying is, I want to know your plan and think it over very carefully before committing myself."

"Fair enough, I guess," Al said. "I've got to run now, Joe. I don't enjoy the freedoms of bachelorhood. Jean gets upset if I'm late for dinner."

The Babcocks' evening meal was brief and largely silent. Al and Jean exchanged only a few monosyllables, and the children, sensing the strain, were subdued. Afterward, Al started up to his study to phone Abernathy.

"You won't forget, Al?" Jean called.

"Forget what?"

"The children. You promised to talk to them."

"Oh, hell! All right—I'll get it over with. Kids, come up to my study for a minute, will you?"

Liz and Dick sat apprehensively across the desk from Al, hands folded in their laps, bracing themselves for some mysterious parental admonition. How in God's name was he going to explain it?

"Look, kids, relax. You didn't do anything. Your mother feels that I should tell you something. Both of us are under a heavy strain and—well, at the moment, we aren't getting along very well together. That can happen, Liz."

He looked appealingly at his daughter. The back of her hand was pressed against her mouth. She'd always done that when she was overtired or unhappy. She looked at him, then looked away. She didn't say anything.

He turned to his son. "Dick, this isn't a big deal. Nothing to worry about. Your mother—well, both of us—just thought we owed you an explanation. For a while, anyhow, I'm going to use the guest bedroom. There! That's all there is to it."

Dick stared back accusingly. "You always told me, Daddy, never to go to bed mad at anybody."

"This is different. I didn't say I was angry at your mother."

"But if you're going into the other room, you don't love her. And if you don't love Mommy, then you don't love us."

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"I do, Dick, I do! Liz, tell your brother. You know how much I love both of you."

She started to say something, then pressed her hand against her mouth and shook her head. It almost broke Al's heart to see the tears starting. In a minute, he'd be crying himself or else he'd take it out by getting angry at them.

"O.K., kids," he said hastily. "That's all. Cheer up, will you? Now go watch television or something."

After they had filed out, silently, reproachfully, Al buried his face in his arms. He'd been feeling sorry for himself. It was the kids, really, who were getting the short end of the stick. That was the unfairest thing about this mess. And all the more reason to fight back.

Maybe, if he could rehabilitate himself at the Club, Jean would come down off her angry Cloud Nine. And Helen? Dammit, one problem at a time. He dialed Ed Abernathy's number.

"Sorry you're under the weather, Ed. Nothing serious, I hope?"

Ed was not given to use of the delicate latinisms of medicine. "No. Just the runs."

"Oh. I want your advice."

Al told him what he'd told Joe Amory, but this time he didn't make the mistake of thanking him for his blackball.

"I don't know, Al. I just don't know."

"Now don't tell me I should make a silent sacrifice of myself for the Club! I've heard that once today."

"Hell, no! I'm a practical man. I'm familiar with Article Five, Section Two—because I had the same harebrained idea myself once upon a time."

"I need you, Ed. Very few members aren't beholden to Peabottom, one way or another. And among those, a lot are gutless. Like Jon."

"Jon! Overbred and undersexed. Reminds me of a fellow I knew in Shepherd, ratty old house outside the Yard in Cambridge, torn down now. This character was so fastidious he skimmed through *Psychopathia Sexualis* looking for the clean parts. Honest!"

"But I think a lot of them on the Board secretly admired me last night. We'd get support there."

"Don't rely on any underground, Al. They remind me of some of those foreign undergrounds. They went so far underground that they didn't come up until after the war."

"Are you with me?"

"In spirit, yes. In hard fact, I don't know. You see, Al, you're one special kind of Club politician. This kind of situation requires a different kind. And I doubt if you can get any place trying to change your politics in midstream."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"You've always played it the cool, correct, second-generation way. Largely on the name Babcock. Now, don't get offended! You know that's true if you stop and think a minute. Up the ladder, one committee at a time, never leapfrogging, never getting out of line."

"You think I can't fight?"

"I didn't say that. I question if you know how to fight in a Donnybrook. Which is what this would be."

"You're frank enough, God knows. Will you at least think it over?"

"I'll do more. I'll take some very discreet soundings of my own. You know I like a fight, Al. It's just that I don't like to get licked. So let me nose around to see if we have a sporting chance."

"Thanks, Ed."

When he hung up, Al took out the constitution and carefully read both sections in Article V, making sure that Peabottom hadn't inserted some loophole in Section I that nullified Section II.

In murky, corporation-lawyer prose, Section I described the selection and the number of members and the duties of the Nominating Committee in preparing the official slate of candidates. This was submitted to the annual meeting held each October after the Club had closed for the season. Getting on the slate was like winning a Democratic primary in the South. Election could usually be taken for granted.

► Friday, July 15

No, no loopholes, and Section II was couched in shockingly illegal, understandable language:

*"None of the provisions of Section I shall preclude submission of an independent slate of candidates, provided that at least ten Active Members in good standing shall sign the petition and that said petition is delivered to the Secretary by registered mail in sufficient time to be posted on the bulletin board for ten days prior to the Annual Meeting."*

► Chapter Sixteen

JULY
FRIDAY
15

The Cotillion was only two weeks off. What with snaring three escorts for Liz (a thoughtful form of wallflower insurance ordained by the committee in charge) and arranging a dinner party for fourteen for before the Cotillion, she and Jean simply hadn't had time to do any shopping. Already, it was too late to order a custom-made dress for Liz; they would have to take what they could find. There wasn't another moment to lose!

Since neither of them could drive, Al was presented with an ultimatum. Whatever his appointments for the day, he would have to chauffeur them.

"I have to see an important client at eleven," he protested. "Best I can do is to drop you off at Silliman's right at nine and drive you back home at ten-thirty. I'll just make it."

"An hour and a half?" Jean's voice was scandalized.



"Really, Al, we're not buying pots and pans for the kitchen. This may take hours. And not Silliman's."

"I have my reasons for going to Silliman's."

Maybe, he was thinking, old Henry would be somewhat mollified if he knew the Babcocks were giving him business and would forgive Al, a little, for the Dreyer business.

"And I have my reasons for going to Chez Celeste. *You* may say the prices are a bit high, but Madame has the French instinct for just the right thing."

Al surrendered. Privately, though, he resolved that Mme Celeste, who was short, fat, beady-eyed, and who may or may not have been French, would not talk Jean into something ruinously extravagant. He'd tag along with her and Liz until a quarter of eleven or so as bodyguard of the family pocketbook.

As when visiting the maternity ward in a hospital, Al always felt uneasy walking into a women's shop. He expected to surprise someone in a slip or less who would embarrass him with girlish screams of modesty. But it had to be done.

At the sight of Mrs. Babcock, one of her most darling customers, Mme Celeste lost her rather uncertain French accent. Jean's answering gush was a mixture of triumph and apology. Yes, Liz would be coming out at the Cotillion, doesn't time just *fly*, only we've been too, too busy to shop, and we must rely on you, Madame.

"So sweet, so tiny-waisted, Mrs. Babcock! With those *big* gray-blue eyes and long lashes and light brown hair, she will be ravishing, simply ravishing, in an evening gown. And I have the very thing for her."

Imperiously, she snapped her fingers.

A saleslady who had been lurking nearby darted to the rear behind velvet curtains that concealed the workshop and fitting rooms. A few moments later, she returned with something gossamer, yards and yards and yards of airy white stuff that almost floated.

Al couldn't begin to describe it, but it looked awfully expensive. Jean was ecstatic.

► *Friday, July 15*

"Nylon net and Alençon lace!" she breathed reverently. "The very thing, of course!"

"Over pleated net and white satin, Mrs. Babcock."

"And, Mommy! With an off-the-shoulder lace bodice!"

Al coughed nervously.

"La, la! You men are all the same, Mr. Babcock. You're thinking of the price, of course."

"Well, Madame, she's only seventeen. She's not ready for a wedding dress."

Mme Celeste looked as tragic as she could under the happy circumstance of a sale nearly closed. "Odd that you should say that, Mr. Babcock. Very odd. This gown was custom-made as a wedding dress. Then the engagement was broken. The circumstances were so sad. I couldn't bear to tell you the details."

She dabbed her eyes.

"But—perfect for a debutante," she added hastily. "Notice, Mr. Babcock, the lace bodice with the darling little cap sleeves. It would not be modest for a debutante, any more than for a bride, to wear any gown that was low-cut or strapless."

Al nodded suspiciously. Maybe, since Madame was stuck with the thing, he could get it at a decent price.

"And it's going for a song, Mr. Babcock. A song! I put my heart into that gown, and I want it to be the happy gown that I intended."

Again, she snapped her fingers.

"Marie, fetch a full hoop and very full crinoline and take Miss Babcock to a fitting room. You will have to help her into them, and then into the gown. Be very careful of the precious thing!"

Madame glanced toward Jean, and Al sensed that some mysterious feminine understanding was being reached. "Men are so statistical-minded, Mrs. Babcock. I think your husband would be impressed to know how much lovely, expensive material goes into a creation like that."

She picked up a pencil and one of her engraved business

cards. For a moment, the beady eyes were as briskly calculating as a stockbroker's. Then she began scribbling.

"There are seven layers, Mr. Babcock. The hoop, three and a half yards, and then the crinoline, six and a half. That's ten yards. Next, *one* satin pattacoat, six yards, and *two* plain silk net petticoats, seven and three-fourths and eight yards, respectively. And one *knife*-pleated silk net petticoat, thirty-two yards, and the lace dress itself, seven and a half yards. Let me total it."

As she was adding up the figures, Al resignedly upped his estimate.

"Altogether, it is *seventy-one and one-fourth* yards around the bottom, Mr. Babcock!"

It will be a hundred dollars, he decided.

"Oh, here she is, the darling! Isn't she beautiful!"

Al looked and caught his breath.

Framed against the dark velvet curtains was a swirling, billowy vision. Liz's hair was a bit mussed and she walked uncertainly in seventy-one and a quarter yards of loveliness, but she breathed all the elegance of Sargent, all the poetry of Degas.

"Mr. and Mrs. Babcock, your debutante daughter!"

Jean took out a handkerchief. Al nodded mutely.

Here, in this improbable locale, a child had magically vanished forever behind a velvet curtain, and a radiant young woman had emerged to console him splendidly, and yet he felt the ache of the loss and wondered if even surrendering a daughter to marriage could be a sharper thrust.

"And I told you it would go for a song. Only one hundred and seventy-five dollars, Mr. Babcock."

At the moment, he didn't care.

"Mommy, Daddy! It's lovely. May I have it? Please, please!"

Al looked at Jean and nodded. She dried her eyes. "Of course, dear. Now walk forward. Very slowly, very carefully. I am worried about the length. With so much dancing, it will be torn to pieces if it drags on the floor. What do you think, Mme Celeste?"

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Madame's fat lips pursed thoughtfully. "I would say that it should be shortened to at least two inches off the floor. Marie, take Miss Babcock back to the fitting room and pin her up, please. It will be only half an hour, Mr. Babcock."

He glanced at his watch. It was ten. He could just make the eleven o'clock appointment.

Jean looked at him impatiently. "Now don't fidget, Al. While we're waiting, I'll look for something for myself."

"You buying a dress! You're not coming out."

"My best evening gown is white, isn't it?"

"Does that matter?"

"It certainly does. The committee has specifically requested the mothers *not* to wear white. They don't want to take the chance that any of us will be mistaken for our daughters."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Jean!"

Selecting the right dress for her required the combined ministrations of Madame and Marie. When Liz finally came out of the fitting room in street clothes, almost but not quite a child again, Jean still hadn't decided. "Jean, unless I take you people home now, I won't make my eleven o'clock appointment."

"We simply can't put this off another day."

"All right. I'll call Miss Meredith and get her to change it to this afternoon. I hope."

When he returned from the phone, relieved yet frustrated, since it seemed the client had called to cancel, Jean had finally made her decision.

"Don't you like it, Al?" she asked unnecessarily. "Toast-colored Chantilly lace over beige taffeta."

He nodded. "How much?"

"Very practical, too. Cocktail length and with a bouffant skirt. I can wear it most any place."

"How much?"

"Only a hundred and ten."

"Plus the one seventy-five for Liz's! Let's get out of here."

"Oh, Al, I keep telling you—please don't always talk like a husband! It will take a while for the fitting."

"All right. I'll go settle with the altruistic Madame. She'll

have to take a check, though. Thank the Lord I never let you have a charge account here!"

Checkbook in hand, Al went over to the little cubicle where Madame did her accounting. "Two hundred and eighty-five, plus sales tax at three and a half per cent? That's nine-ninety-eight more, or a total of two hundred and ninety-four ninety-eight, the way I figure it."

"And twenty-five dollars for the hoop and crinoline, Mr. Babcock."

"Oh."

"And of course the customary seventeen-fifty for the alterations to Miss Babcock's gown."

"Oh."

"So the total is three hundred and twenty-seven dollars and fifty cents. Oh dear, that's *without* the sales tax. I am *so* impractical about figures. Tax on the dresses, hoop, and crinoline come to ten-eighty-five. No tax on the alterations. Now, let me add it up again."

She scribbled rapidly.

"Two dresses and one hoop and crinoline, and the alterations, and sales tax. It comes to only three hundred and thirty-eight thirty-five! And you've snapped up the two best bargains at Chez Celeste, Mr. Babcock. I certainly congratulate you!"

And she looks me right in the eye when she says it, Al thought. He didn't quite trust himself to answer.

Jean came out of the fitting room. "Al, Liz, Madame. It fits almost perfectly! You see—I haven't lost my figure. Oh, in one or two places it may have to be let out just a tiny bit."

"Allow me, Mrs. Babcock, to do it at no extra charge."

"Why, thank you, Madame. You are very generous."

"Come on, Jean, Liz. Let's get going."

"Al, wait. I almost forgot. Madame, do you think you could find a seam and snip off a little piece of lace for me?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Babcock. You don't mind waiting another few minutes? We have to find just the right seam, you will appreciate."

"What the devil is this for?" Al asked.

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"My shoes, of course. They'll have to match the dress exactly."

"Can't you walk from here to Silliman's and let me go back to the office for half an hour or so?"

"I'm sorry, Al. But Schlegel's Bootery, up in the shopping center, is the *only* place to find decent evening pumps."

By now Al had passed the point of protest. He shrugged resignedly.

At the Bootery, Liz's white satin evening pumps cost twenty dollars. Jean ordered a similar pair.

"Forty dollars plus sales tax?" Al asked the clerk, a willowy, overdressed young man.

"Quite right," he replied languidly. "That's forty-one forty, and two dollars to dye madam's shoes to match her dress. Total, forty-three forty."

Al handed him three twenties and turned impatiently to Jean. "We must be through now, aren't we?"

"One more thing. I'll make do with my old gloves, but Liz *must* have a pair of sixteen-buttons."

"I have the *very* pair, madam. White kid, imported, *very* soft. Just feel them. Don't they *caress* the hand and arm?"

Insolent young fairy, Al thought. "How much?" he asked.

The clerk shrugged fastidiously. "The price, sir, is twenty-five dollars. Plus tax, of course."

"Haven't you anything cheaper?"

"Al!"

"Please, Jean. She's not getting married."

Almost flouncing, the clerk found another box and opened it. "*Domestic* kid," he said disdainfully. "Much heavier. But only fifteen dollars, sir."

"They'll do," Al replied shortly. "How long will she be keeping the damned things on, anyhow? And I don't see sixteen buttons."

"Sir?"

"Oh, Daddy, of course there are only three buttons. They just *call* them sixteen-button gloves."

"Your father is trying to be witty, dear. He's seen me wearing them to formals for years. You know perfectly well,

Al—it's just a form of measurement. The elbows have to be covered."

"Then why don't you say so?"

The clerk was not amused. He wrapped the glove box and handed it to Jean. "Fifteen dollars, sir, *and* fifty-three cents sales tax. That will be fifteen-fifty-three."

Al ignored the insolence. Out of the morning's financial wreckage, he had at least been able to save ten dollars. "Come on, now! I'll drop you off at the house. I'm sorry, but I just don't have the time to take you to lunch."

"You can't put it off any longer, Al. You *will* do your own shopping some time today, won't you?"

"Shop for what, Jean?"

"You certainly can't wear that tacky old white dinner jacket. You'd shame Liz. *All* the fathers will be wearing Italian silk jackets."

"They cost ninety dollars! I saw one the other day."

"Please, Daddy! You'd look so handsome. I'd be so proud of you."

"All right. But whether you like it or not I'm going to do my shopping at Silliman's."

After dinner that evening, Al felt further financial forebodings as he overheard Jean and Liz planning the dinner party. In addition to Liz and her three escorts, there would be her attendant Gina, and Gina's escort. Then Jean and Al, and three couples who were friends of theirs—the Abernathys, the Ted McDonalds, and the Winstons.

"What's the total damage?" he asked.

"We'll have a party of fourteen," Jean replied. "But you don't have to pay for Liz and her escorts. They are included in the price of the coming-out. That leaves ten of us, at ten dollars apiece, only a hundred dollars all told."

She made it sound like a bargain.

"Plus drinks," Al added.

"Well, *you* wanted Ed Abernathy, who will drink the most. I wanted the McDonalds, and we *must* have the Winstons. Their son Pete is Liz's first escort, after all."

The phone interrupted, and Al answered. It was Sally, poi-

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sonously gushy. "The most dreadful thing has happened, Al—well, in your case, I guess it isn't really dreadful, but it could have been. It's those silly fire laws!"

"Housatonic's been inspected. We don't have any violations."

"It isn't that. We have to limit the total number of people in the Club at the various dinner parties, and since Liz was the last one asked—the question of her age, you know—I'm sure you haven't yet arranged your dinner party, so you won't have the embarrassment of cutting it back."

"Well, as a matter of fact, Sally—"

"If that's Sally, I'll talk to her!"

Jean snatched the receiver out of Al's hand. "Hello, dear. I can't trust Al with important things. He gets messages hopelessly confused. Was it something about the coming-out party?"

There was a moment's silence as Sally talked. Jean's face darkened, but her voice was determinedly unconcerned. "Of course, Sally. I understand. No, it will be no trouble at all. As a matter of fact, with so many boys working or away for the summer, we've barely settled the problem of the escorts. We were just getting around to planning the dinner party."

She cupped the receiver and turned to Al. "It's starting!"

"What's starting?"

She gestured at him to be silent.

"Yes, Sally. A total of *ten*? That includes Liz and her three escorts. And her attendant and escort? *And* us? That leaves us room for one additional couple at our table? No, perfectly all right, dear. Actually, it simplifies things."

She finished, then hung up slowly. "Fire laws, Sally says. She's making us cut down our dinner party. I'll bet no one else is being asked to."

"Why didn't you tell her the truth? We have already asked the other couples."

"I wouldn't give her the satisfaction. She'd still insist. I told you, Al, that we would be untouchables. This is part of it."



"At ten dollars a head, I save forty dollars. This kind of revenge I can enjoy."

"Fine! Now, which two couples are you going to call and what kind of explanations are you going to make?"

"Me? You're the hostess."

"We wouldn't have been in this mess if you hadn't been so impossible about the Dreyers!"

"Well, let's start by scratching Gina and her escort."

"We can't. Every girl *must* have an attendant. And an attendant must have her own escort."

"Then we start with the Winstons. God knows, he wasn't too much help to me when I needed him. And they're both stuffed shirts into the bargain."

"Remember their son Pete, first escort? The Winstons stay."

"Then lop off escorts two and three."

"Don't be ridiculous. A debutante without *three* escorts would look—well, almost naked."

"But that leaves only the people we really like, the Abernathys and the McDonalds."

"It can't be helped. It's the only way. And you'll have to do it. I can't face them. I only hope the wives haven't bought new gowns!"

"Well, I can't do it tonight. I wouldn't know what to say if the wives answered, I'll call Ed and Ted at their offices first thing tomorrow."

"Maybe it would soften it if at the same time you invited them to the cocktail party."

"What cocktail party?"

"The one we'll have to give here before we all go to the Club."

"But that's ridiculous! A dinner party, a coming-out, dancing and drinking afterward, and now a cocktail party. This thing is getting out of hand altogether."

"That reminds me," Jean said. "We forgot to buy evening hose and a white evening bag for Liz."

Al swore. "Why the devil does she have to come out, anyhow? Especially this year when I'm starting college payments for her."

► *Saturday, July 30*

"Especially *this* year. You ought to be proud that she's bright enough at her age to enter junior college. And in a social school, a coming-out means *so* much."

"You just said she was bright. Can't she get along on merit?"

"Oh, Al, don't sound so naïve. Social position is what counts, not merit. Just as it does right here in Housatonic."

He stared at her slowly, detachedly, as though she were a woman he was just beginning to understand.

"I could almost respect you, Jean, if you accepted that set of values because you were a hypocrite. You know, playing the game cynically because it's the only way to get what you want. I could even understand an appeaser—someone who is afraid to stand up and be counted for an honest set of values. But you just—blindly accept all this nonsense as right!"

He turned and went up to bed.

► *Chapter Seventeen*

JULY
SATURDAY
30

The scene was something that Dali might have painted if he were social-minded and had a sense of humor.

The background was the Club ballroom, forlorn as all ballrooms are in early afternoon before the chairs are unstacked, the tables set, the decorations hung. The protagonists were twenty men—fat, skinny, tall, short, all perspiring heavily—

and twenty girls who looked even more grotesque. Over their Bermuda shorts and cotton blouses they wore naked hoops, and most of them, having preferred to set their own hair, had tied silk scarves around their heads to conceal the rollers.

In the 93-degree heat, fathers and debutante daughters were going through the first and only rehearsal of the intricate cotillion steps they would perform that night at the coming-out under the pitiless stares of wives, friends, and escorts one, two, and three.

Liz looked as silly as the rest, but she, at least, having gone to the beauty parlor earlier in the day for a shampoo, set, and manicure, didn't have on one of those silly-looking scarves. Al had dropped her and Jean off at the salon at nine-thirty, had picked them up two hours later, and then they'd all gone home for lunch. Which, of course, they were too nervous to finish.

He and Liz were preoccupied by the social gauntlet they would have to run; Jean was worrying about preparations for the cocktail party. She barked orders to Nettie, the cleaning woman, who would tidy up and then stay to preside over the kitchen. Twice she called the Club to make sure that Abe would be allowed to do their bartending before he had to report for work at the Cotillion.

Al had been relieved to get out of the house, but now, as he stumbled through the stately, confusing turns of the cotillion, he felt even more nervous. The last time the dance had been inflicted on him, he remembered, was in those unhappy, far-off days at Miss Slocum's classes when he had had to wear a Little Lord Fauntleroy suit with gold trimmings and a high collar and had sneaked down the street Saturday mornings so the other fellows wouldn't see him.

Even in those days, the formal bow with left hand behind the back, right hand across the stomach, had given him trouble, and there'd been considerably less stomach in those days, too. Now, each time he bowed to Liz, he seemed to totter.

*Two steps away from partner, turn slowly and two steps back.*

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As the pianist pounded out a tune in four-four time, the dance mistress clapped her hands and rhythmically chanted. "One-two-three-four, one-two-three-four."

Al counted to himself, "One-two, squeeze in the turn, three-four, and here we are." A grocer's boy bringing in supplies peeped into the ballroom and grinned.

"Again!" the dance mistress ordered.

Al turned away from Liz and lost the count. He circled and found himself alone.

"Mr. Babcock. Two steps forward and turn, not four!"

He grinned sheepishly at Liz.

In most dances, your partner's feet suffer for your errors. The cotillion must, he thought, have been invented in retaliation by all womanhood. Your missteps are cruelly exposed to the entire ballroom.

There was a figure march, too, with Liz on his right. Somehow, despite the hoop that separated them, he was supposed to escort her gracefully, casually, as they slowly circled the ballroom counterclockwise.

The hoop was encumbrance enough, and tonight there would be those yards and yards of skirt and billowing petticoats over it. He'd never make it! He'd tangle, he'd trip sure as hell.

"And now, girls, the Star of Texas!"

Uncertainly, in ragged lines of five, the girls formed the four points of a star and pivoted.

Poor Liz, being short, was on the outer end. The tall girls in the heart of the star circled fast, and she had almost to run to keep her place in the line.

"Again! Lines straight, and pivot slowly."

It was a little smoother this time, but if there were any foul-up tonight, Liz would be the one who would look bad.

"Now, file off slowly, in time, and rejoin your fathers for the *weaving* step."

The ultimate horror.

Walking Liz around the ballroom, making sure not to foul the hoop, had been bad enough. This time, they circled in opposite directions.

Pass one girl on the port side, weave, clear the next on the starboard—watch those damned hoops! Pass nineteen girls—nineteen times seventy-something yards of skirt and petticoat!—and at last meet Liz again.

He could see it in gruesome clarity. If he didn't tangle, didn't trip, then he would probably make two port passings in a row, and the whole beautiful, glittering movement would collapse in social chaos caused by him, Al Babcock.

Sometimes in crises, Al could recall drearier things out of the past which made the present seem a little less dreadful. Now he remembered that once in the Navy, when he had been stationed in England, a princess had inspected their ship. He had been formally presented; he had chatted with her; the thing had come off well.

Surely a little coming-out in Housatonic wouldn't be nearly so formidable. But this time the trick didn't work. After all, the princess hadn't asked him to dance a cotillion with her.

"Fathers, you did splendidly!" The dance mistress sounded suspiciously like the cheer leader of a losing team. "Tonight, we'll all be so proud of you. Remember, Mr. Babcock, *two* steps, not four. Now you can all go home."

"Daddy, I'm exhausted!"

"Me, too, Liz. But we'll muddle through tonight. Don't you worry."

Al had always dreaded giving cocktail parties. They were such wildly unpredictable gambles. Somehow, the mystic whole was more than the sum of the olives, canapés, and alcohol consumed. But tonight should be reasonably successful, since it would be a brief and modest affair.

In addition to Liz and escorts one, two, and three, and Gina with her boy, they had invited only a dozen couples to drop in between seven and eight P.M. After all, as they explained, their party had to be at the Club by nine o'clock. Al took some solace in revising downward the probable expense of the party.

Half an hour ahead of time, he and Jean double-checked to make sure everything was ready. The trays of food were stacked in the kitchen, covered with napkins. Abe was at the

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makeshift bar on the sun porch. Glasses, bottles, ice were all in place.

Shortly after seven, the guests began arriving, the first being Liz's music teacher and her husband. They always arrived early and stayed late. Next were another duty couple, Liz's school principal and her husband, and then the Abernathys and the McDonalds.

Al saw the party congealing into three blocs: the kids, self-conscious and awkward in their finery; the two duty couples, dowdy and also self-conscious; the Abernathys and the McDonalds, who saw each other so often that there wasn't much for them to talk about.

He couldn't do anything about the kids, except to offer them soft drinks, but in the manner of the desperate host, he could try to thaw the others by plying them with Scotch and martinis. Unfortunately, the music teacher would take only a glass of Dubonnet, which Al hadn't even stocked. The principal's husband said he didn't drink at all.

"But don't let me stop you folks for a minute," he said with the hearty tolerance of a YMCA secretary.

Ed Abernathy shot him a withering glance. "I need a double bourbon," he announced. "On the sun porch? Mama, I'll fetch you one, too."

This left Al saddled with Mama, a lady who afforded him little conversational stimulus since she talked only about tennis. He looked for Jean to rescue him and saw that she was similarly trapped by the music teacher's husband. It was another portent. When cocktail parties swing, host and hostess are largely ignored.

"I'd like a word with you later," Ted McDonald said. "I talked to the Commodore Emeritus."

"Fine, Ted. He'll probably be along himself in a little while."

"Afraid not. I had to call him on some Club business just before we left. He said to tell you something had suddenly come up, and would I please convey his deepest apologies to Jean and you."

"Oh, thanks. I'm sorry he can't make it."

Abernathy returned with the drinks, and Al was able to disengage himself from Mama.

Instead of the loud conversational hum that should have been heard, the talk in the room went in fits and starts. Al circled among the groups, trying to thaw them, to start that fluidity of conversation and movement that makes for a happily disorganized cocktail party. Finally, he gave up.

With Ted, he went out onto the big sun porch at the opposite end from Abe's neglected bar, where they could talk privately. "I think you've already told me, Ted. No compromise by the old man?"

Ted shook his head. "You know him. You've seen him operate before. I'm sure you're not really surprised."

"No. But, being an insurance man, I live in hope as long as I can. Now I'll have to think about other plans."

"Daddy?" Liz's face was troubled. "You shouldn't neglect your guests. Mr. Amory has just arrived with his fiancée."

Al and Ted kept straight faces. As long as they could remember, longer than Liz had been alive, Housatonic society, in its curiously charitable way toward those who were accepted, had tolerated Joe Amory's long and faintly suggestive "engagement."

"Thanks, Liz. I'll be right there. Now you run along."

"Is anything wrong, Daddy?"

"Of course not. Ted and I just had a little Club business that we wanted to talk over."

After she went back into the living room, Al squeezed Ted's arm. "I know you did what you could. And I want to apologize to you again for the mixup on the party. It just couldn't be helped, apparently."

"Ed and I understand. More important, so do our wives. We understand what you're up against, Al. It isn't nice."

Al nodded and then went inside to greet Amory and his somewhat overblown, overpainted companion. Joe's leathery, wind-dried complexion never showed a telltale whisky flush noticeable in a fair-skinned man like Al, but the beads of perspiration on his forehead gave him away. "Al! You know

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my fiancée Martha, of course. Want to talk to you, Al. Been thinking about what you asked me to do."

"Not here, Joe! Later, all right?"

Dammit, the man was drunk.

"Soul of discretion, my boy. But what I have to say anybody can hear. Just that I haven't made up my mind."

"Sure, Joe, there's no rush. What are you drinking?"

"Martha and I can take care of ourselves."

He bowed to his companion, and Martha's round dull face broke into a kittenish smile as he took her arm with elaborate gallantry. Then he turned to stare owlishly at Al. "Never worry about my discretion, boy. I will now say something in parable, allegory, or symbolism that only you and I will understand, though all may hear."

Al knew better than to try to shut him up. It would only make him talk more.

"In the seesaw of life, my dear young friend, there comes a time when the memories of past disasters outweigh one's future expectations, and then one knows one is getting old. And I am getting old, Al. Which means—"

"That you tend more to be against what we talked about than for it, Joe. That's all right. Perfectly all right. The bar's out on the sun porch. Abe will fix you up."

Dammit, till the party was over, he'd have to keep Joe out of the way or else he'd be blabbing all over the place.

Jean caught his eye. Obediently, he joined her in the corner where she was talking to the McDonalds and Abernathys. "Will you excuse us, people? I think we should circulate a little."

She took his arm, led him casually about the room, and then steered him unexpectedly into the kitchen.

"Nettie, you had better put on another tray of canapés."

"I didn't think they were eating much, ma'am."

"Please do as I say."

"Yes, ma'am."

As soon as Nettie left, she wheeled on him. "This is insufferable! Do you realize people are cutting the party?"



"I didn't have a chance to tell you. Peabottom sent his regrets through Ted McDonald."

"I might have known. And where are Sally and her husband? And the two couples they were going to bring with them? *And* the parents of Liz's first escort?"

Al shrugged. Feminine rhetorical questions not only require no answer, he knew; they also demand no answer.

"I can stand Martha, but I do think your friend Joe Amory strains our hospitality when he shows up drunk. And that stupid, stupid man I was caught with! You saw it. Why didn't you help me?"

"I was caught myself. Now take it easy, Jean. You don't want to get a headache tonight. You mustn't, for Liz's sake."

Suddenly, Liz was in the kitchen with them, her eyes darting anxiously from one to the other. "Mommy, Daddy! You aren't fighting, are you?"

"Of course not, dear. I had to talk to your father about a few problems, that's all."

"I'm glad. I just wanted to tell you—the Winstons have arrived."

"Isn't that nice!" Jean couldn't keep the sharpness out of her voice. "I'm so glad that they could make it after all. We'll hurry right in and greet them."

Even the arrival of the elegant couple did nothing to salvage the party or Jean's temper.

"So sorry we were detained, Jean," Jon said grandly. "We were at another affair, and we told Sally we'd simply have to cut and run. After all, Pete is first escort, isn't he?"

Jean was dying to ask what other affair, but restrained herself magnificently. "You will have time for a drink, of course?"

Already, some of the others were leaving. Jon cocked his head judicially as he decided. "Well, perhaps one. A short one. It's eight-ish already."

By eight-ten, the last of them, the Winstons and even the music teacher and her husband, had departed. Jean closed the front door behind them, then she leaned against it and

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sighed. "Disaster! *Total* disaster! Look at the food left over. Enough for another party."

"There wasn't much drinking, Abe said."

"I told you, Al Babcock—we can expect this sort of thing!"

"Cheer up. The real party hasn't even started."

"You don't think it stops here, do you? This will go on far into the night and tomorrow night and the night after that. I wish I could get that through your head."

"Mommy, Daddy, what's *wrong*?"

"Liz, I thought you were up in your room with Gina. There's nothing wrong that concerns you, dear. Now run along. Rest a few minutes if you can without spoiling that precious gown. We'll be leaving for the Club in half an hour."

"I wish I could, Mommy. I'll try to rest, but I'm too excited, I think."

In a way, the pre-coming-out dinner was for them a dull extension of the cocktail party. As Jean had foreseen, theirs was the only table for ten. Worse, they had been placed next to the kitchen. In the mystifying way of Housatonic's service, this was always the last, rather than the first table to be waited on, and the delay overtaxed the conversational reserves of Al's guests.

He sat at the head, with Jean on his right and Jon's wife on his left. Jon was below Jean, and Gina's gangling, tongue-tied escort was seated to the left of Jon's wife. Liz presided at the opposite end, Pete and Gina on her left, escorts two and three on her right.

Because of the two extra escorts, the seating had to be lopsided, with three men bunched together. And the ages were lopsided, too. So, as at the cocktail party, the talk went by fits and starts, interspersed with awkward silences.

As Sally had warned, there wasn't even whisky to sustain Al. In its bureaucratic, big-brother way, the State Liquor Authority felt responsibility for teenagers even when they were with their own parents.

Al reminded himself in all fairness that Sally's committee did have to defer to the Authority's scruples—and to Housatonic's license. But that was damned little consolation as he

tried to make do with the pallid assistance of the nonalcoholic champagne. He sipped, trying to pretend the stuff was real, but it was too heroic a challenge for his imagination. Anyhow, he didn't like champagne in the first place.

Conscientiously, he made small talk with Jon's wife. It was heavy going. She had all the acquired assurance of a Winston, plus the insufferable arrogance of a woman who has married a little above her. With even less success he worked at drawing out Gina's escort. A mute, he decided.

Jean exchanged a few monosyllables with Jon. They at least were evenly matched. At the other end of the table, Liz was trying with the forced, obvious gaiety of an inexperienced girl to entertain Pete and her other two uncommunicative escorts. Faint circles were beginning to show under her eyes, and Al felt a fierce protectiveness toward her.

Finally, toward eleven o'clock, the meal was finished and the dishes cleared away. Al got up from the table. "Will you excuse me?"

He turned to Jean and Jon's wife and bowed ceremoniously down the length of the table to Liz.

"Now, you're not going to start wandering," Jean said icily.

"Of course not, my dear. But I see the other happy, expectant fathers rising, and I suspect we're wanted for a briefing."

"You won't go to the Cellar. Promise?"

"I'm afraid I will have to pass *through* the Cellar. The briefing is being held in the board room."

Liz giggled, and Jean glanced crossly down the table at her.

"See that you do pass through."

"My dear, your lack of trust wounds me deeply."

There was another smothered giggle from the far end. He didn't give a damn if Jean heard it. This was Liz's night. He would try to keep her spirits up and, more, he would drink very, very sparingly until the ordeal was over. It was the supreme parental sacrifice.

"I apologize for the phrase, Jean, but perhaps you could kill two birds with one stone if you took our guests down to the Cellar."

"Really, Al, your language."

"I apologized in advance. I'm sure the Winstons are parched. And there will be more of this godawful champagne for Liz's crowd. That is, if their gallant young stomachs can stand it. At the same time, you can be policing me."

In the board room, Al joined the nineteen other fortunate fathers as Sally briskly laid down her committee's orders to them.

"The *committee*"—the word rang with awesome feminine authority—"has planned that you report behind the ivy-covered folding screen at the entrance to the ballroom at *exactly* a quarter to twelve. That gives you until three-quarters of an hour from now.

"The *committee* feels that timing is of the essence if your daughters are to be presented *exactly* at the stroke of midnight.

"Please listen closely. If you wish to freshen up, do so now. If you want a drink or two—no more than two!—please have them now.

"The *committee* has tried to think of everything to make the evening a success. The rest is up to you. That's all. The *committee* thanks you for your support."

From someplace behind Al, *sotto voce*: "All right, men. Fall out!"

It was Jack Baldwin, the rather sour, scholarly proprietor of Housatonic's only bookstore, who managed to keep the business going because he had married well, if not happily.

"*Te morituri*, Jack."

"*Et cum spiritu*, Al. Don't we look like a bunch of clowns? A sort of disorganized male chorus line waiting for opening-night curtain call."

"Come on. Let's get a drink. Maybe two. Sally said we could."

"I love the way women mastermind these things, practically bankrupt us, and then, when it comes to the really dirty part, the bowing, the scraping, the cotillioning, they make us do it and they contribute only their criticism. Why the hell

don't they present their daughters? They get all the fun out of it."

"Come to think of it, you're perfectly right, Jack."

"When I made the suggestion to Ruth, she dismissed it as patently absurd. But then, to my wife, *most* of my ideas are patently absurd."

"Hurry it up, will you, Mike? These drinks are purely medicinal."

"I also did some research down at the store. It was the women around Victoria's time, or just before, who gave us the *début* as we know it. And here's what I resent, Al. They stole a fine old word right out of the masculine vocabulary."

"Masculine?"

"Yes, sir. *Débuter* originally meant to lead off, at the smoking-room game of billiards. A *débutant* was a male performer making his first public appearance."

"Oh-oh. There's Jean with our party. Hope I can smuggle a second drink before she finds me."

"That's it exactly! First, old Sally browbeats and brain-washes us. Now you're scared of your wife. Why can't you be like me? All day, all evening, whenever Ruth has demanded anything of me, I've answered without a moment's hesitation."

"What on earth do you say?"

"'Yes, dear.'"

"I don't remember this kind of nonsense when I was a kid. A girl came out quietly at home."

"Well, maybe we've been a little backward socially in Houston. For a long, long time, the Tuxedo Autumn Ball was the only socially significant mass presentation. But the custom began spreading in the thirties."

"I say—what was good enough for our mothers is good enough for our daughters."

"Actually, the thing doesn't make much sense today. One democratically written etiquette book—three-ninety-five to you, Al, no mark-up—calls the *début* 'a meaningless relic of the past.' It points out with considerable logic that since the sexes are no longer separated, the practical value of the custom has long since disappeared."

"Like hats and hem lengths, logic has nothing to do with it," Al replied glumly. "The women get too much fun out of the relic ever to let go of it. Thank God I've only got one daughter. You have a younger girl, too, don't you, Jack?"

"Don't remind me."

"Al, you promised not to drink!"

"It's only the second, Jean. Sally herself said we could have two. I couldn't possibly run the gauntlet of all our dear friends without some fortification."

"Do be careful. I'm so nervous!"

"You're nervous! Who the devil is going to walk the length of that slippery ballroom and go into a cotillion?"

"It's more than just ordinary nerves. That bitch Margie is spreading the word that she has friends on the Debutante Committee. That there was a big to-do over inviting Liz because she's—Irish."

"I don't believe it."

"You're calling me a liar?"

"No, Margie."

"She isn't bright enough to think that up. They never did quite forget Grandmother Kate, and from now on they never will. For God's sake, be dignified! Don't go into a jig or something."

"Stop helping me, Jean. I'm jittery enough."

Sally swept into the Cellar, reminding Al of a Shore Patrol on a barroom check. The fathers lapsed into a dismayed, waiting silence, and Jean's voice was sweetly penetrating. "Isn't she remarkable, Al! She's much, much older than I am, and still going strong."

Sally ignored the saber thrust.

"Time, gentlemen! The *committee* now requests your presence."

Behind the screen, as the fathers joked nervously, the *committee* was working on the girls with the grim, swift efficiency of prize-fight managers. Noses were powdered, bouffant gowns checked for rips, sixteen-button gloves straightened.

In one corner, a committee lady was fluffing out the enormous bouquets of roses and handing them to the girls. Three

dozen American Beauties! How was Liz supposed to carry that much floral weight throughout the festivities?

Another woman came up to Al and without a word looked him over from head to toe. Authoritatively, she yanked his black tie tighter, nodded, and disappeared. Then another fitted in his lapel a small red rose that matched Liz's bouquet. "You look very handsome, Mr. Babcock."

Nice, nice lady! He needed the encouragement. There was a tiny crack in the folding screen, and he peeked through.

The ballroom looked enormous and treacherously smooth. A red velvet rope supported by shiny brass stanchions ran around both sides and the far end of the room. Down to the right, he saw the red-jacketed orchestra. To the far left, beyond the pillars decked out with greens and roses, was the buffet table holding two large ice sculptures of lambs, symbols of innocence.

What bothered him were the people, almost two hundred and fifty of them. Men in white jackets, women in bright gowns, straining against the rope on all three sides, the flower of Housatonic society, his friends and enemies, waiting for Liz and him to prove themselves by this ordeal of walk-on, deep curtsy, bow, march, and cotillion. They displayed, he thought resentfully, the tender anticipation of a circus crowd waiting for the high wire act to be performed without nets.

Imperiously, someone touched his sleeve and shepherded him over to where the fathers were lining up. The girls were being formed into a single line, too. Al realized, almost in panic, that they were being positioned in order of size, the tiniest girls in front, the taller ones behind. That meant that he and Liz would be presented first—and that wasn't the worst of it.

After that, they would have to walk down that long, empty, shining pit within the rope to the far end. There they would stand alone, the awkward center of attention, until the second couple took their positions across from them. And then they would still wait, dignified yet presumably at ease, till the whole damned forty of them, all the fathers and daughters, were finally arrayed in two facing rows of twenty each.

► Saturday, July 30

The moment came.

Al shot a quick smile toward Liz and then slowly emerged from behind the screen on the left as she appeared on the other side. From the women in the audience, there were *ahhs* at her youthful radiance.

The announcer, Sally's old windbag of a husband, intoned in his forced British accent:

"Mis-tah Ahl-vin Hen-ry Bahb-cock pre-sents his daughtah, Miss Eliza-beth Wahlsh Bahb-cock!"

Was there a faint sneer as he pronounced the "Walsh," or had Jean managed to give him delusions of persecution? Never mind. Liz hadn't caught it. As they correctly nodded to each other, her triumphant smile was dazzling.

Then, all those thirty-six unnecessary roses along her right arm, she sank gracefully into a deep curtsy toward the room. But as Al took her left hand and himself bowed, the little palm in his was trembling.

He tried to break the tension for her. "Get up off your backside," he whispered. "Let's get this show moving."

Very properly, she kept her head up, facing the audience. Only after an interminable period did she slowly rise. Her hand, holding his right arm as they descended three carpeted steps to the ballroom floor, still was trembling a little.

"Remember the instructions, Daddy? Curtsy a full two seconds for the photographers."

"You were superb, Liz. We're over the worst of it already."

"Daddy! My foot is getting tangled in the hoop. Not so fast!"

"Only to get it over with the sooner, my dear. And you've lost your smile. Cheese. *Cheese.*"

Somehow, they came to rest in dignity at their station, and Al was so relieved that he didn't mind the waiting.

In fact, there was a certain sadistic pleasure in watching the other fathers go through it. Some overdid it with pretentious European bows, others bobbed their heads and then scuttled into place like frightened rabbits. The *Walsh Babcocks*, he decided, had done very well by themselves.

"Just think, Liz," he whispered. "You're a debutante! It's



like a fairy story for you, isn't it? And watch closely. We may see poor little Cinderella passing in the other direction."

"Daddy! You'll make me giggle." Suddenly her face sobered. "But, Daddy—what's wrong between you and Mommy? What is it?"

"Shh, Liz. It's time for the Star of Texas. Tell that bean-pole on the inside to pivot slowly."

What could he say to her that wouldn't spoil her evening? What could he possibly say?

To his surprise, the Star wheeled smoothly, each of the four rows even, all twenty girls moving in unison in a swirl of bouffant splendor, dazzling white lace and net and chiffon and all their deep red roses.

The beauty of it, the ethereal feminine beauty unsullied by desire, almost overwhelmed him, and he remembered garbled snatches of poetry out of a sophomore English class.

*And danced the stately saraband . . . All the flower and chivalry of Europe were there . . . She walks in beauty like the night. . . .*

Once again the living Star turned, and then, so suddenly that he found himself staring at an empty space in the middle of the ballroom, the four lines dissolved, and the girls were back with their fathers.

"I'm a woman now, Daddy. I have a *right* to know."

"If only you were a woman, dear, it would be so much easier."

Briefly, lightly, their right arms were interlocked as they started the weaving step, and then the stately, insistent beat of the music separated them as they marched in opposite directions around the room.

*Port . . . starboard . . . port . . . and starboard again. . . . Keep clear of those damned skirts. . . .*

Again they met, this time briefly interlocking left arms.

"And something's gone wrong at the Club for you, and people didn't come to the cocktail party. I know all that, Daddy."

He shook his head. He wouldn't spoil her party.

Inexorably, the beat tore them apart, and the intricate, sophisticated movement, the rhythmic union and separation of the sexes that was a symbolic sublimation of the act of love, circled on.

The mute appeal in her eyes knifed his heart, but even if he had known what to say, he couldn't have stopped and said it. There was no escaping the prison of the cotillion.

When next they met, they moved into a circling step, right shoulder to right shoulder and circle, then left shoulder to left shoulder and circle in the opposite direction. And then the one where they took two steps in opposite directions—the one he had flubbed during rehearsal—and then two steps back, to meet again.

And during all the interminable weaving and circling and stepping out, stepping back, he had only time to whisper, "But you *aren't* a woman yet. I won't let you be! Trust me, dear. Trust me that everything will come out just fine. Just fine."

Then the orchestra sounded a slow chord, and the twenty girls, who had bowed in the beginning to society, now made full curtsies to their fathers. When they rose, the presentation was over.

Quickly, the orchestra struck up *The Blue Danube*, and as Al started the *one-two* of the waltz with Liz, Pete Winston, her first escort, cut in and swirled her into the turn, and the rest of the night was hers. She was lovely, she danced with all the boys, and she carried her three dozen unnecessary roses as though she had been born in a flower shop.

Her eyes glistened as she tried to breathe some animation into that blithering clod, Pete, as she tried to parry in sophisticated fashion with the dashing college freshman who later claimed her, and probably nobody but Al knew that the glistening meant tears, not happiness.

From now on, all her life, she would pay for that magic moment at Chez Celeste when she had slipped out of street clothes and childhood and become almost a woman. And from now on there would be very little he could do, almost nothing, to ease the hurts ahead.

AUGUST
FRIDAY
5

The Baldwins were giving their annual sailing and cocktail party by which they paid off the summer's accumulation of social obligations. They would weigh anchor at the Club promptly at two bells, and so Al arrived home an hour earlier, at four o'clock, to get ready.

In the letter basket in his study was a fat pile of first-of-the-month bills. He ran through them quickly.

The Club, always a bastard for July and a quarter's dues besides. Liz and Dick at the snack bar, Jean at the big girls' bar, his own drinking—it was ruining him. He'd have to have a talk with them. Thank God they'd been away part of the month at Jean's mother's.

The phone bill, with those long-distance calls Jean made to her mother when she wasn't out there. What could they find to talk about all the time, anyhow? And gas-and-electricity, and the gas station, and Silliman's, and the exorbitant bill from the market (Jean didn't drive and the only grocery that still made deliveries charged dearly for the quaint service).

And the yardman who cut the grass with the slow, expensive patience of a diamond cutter, and Al's own chits for the downtown luncheon club and Book-of-the-Month. By God, as well as did old Silliman, he knew what it was to meet a payroll!

Oh Lord, and delayed returns from the Cotillion. The hair-

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dresser: \$8.50 for Liz, \$9 for Jean. The florist, \$20.60 for table flowers and corsage. And the photographer whose men had been flitting around all evening taking formals and candid. \$111! For photographs, \$111!

He called downstairs to the kitchen where Jean was briefing Nettie on getting dinner for Liz and Dick and making sure that they ate it.

"For God's sake, Jean, who ordered a hundred and eleven dollars' worth of photographs?"

"What are you spluttering about? You saw the proofs. Liz is divine, simply divine! Besides, I had to order some for the Winstons."

"I know you haven't the faintest glimmering about money, but don't even *you* think that's going overboard?"

"Here we go again! I'm extravagant. I'd rather not discuss it in front of Nettie. I'll come up. I have a little surprise."

Triumphantly, she handed him an announcement from the *committee*. Like all present-day social functions, the Cotillion had been apologetically conducted in the name of charity, sweet charity. Nobody today, as Al often thought, not even the worst snobs like the Winstons, had the guts to admit publicly that they could enjoy a fancy, extravagant evening hobnobbing with other snobs unless it were for a Worthy Cause.

And, the committee gravely reported, each of the twenty fathers was now entitled to a \$79.82 charitable deduction on his income tax. That meant, Al calculated roughly in his mind, that Housatonic's Hospice for Little Wanderers, the object or excuse for the Cotillion, would profit to the extent of \$1,500 or \$1,600.

Considering that the presentation had cost each of the fathers about \$1,000, that didn't seem like much of a net on the gross. Not to mention the untold womanhours of huffing and puffing by the committee. It would have been much more profitable to all concerned, including the runny-nosed little malcontents in the hospice, if the august ladies had simply assessed each father \$150 in exchange for a suitably

engraved gold bracelet attesting to his daughter's debutante status. But then, no party, no fun.

"There! You think I don't worry about money. You can take \$79.82 off your income tax."

"I'll never get it through your head, Jean! Deductions come off my reportable income, not off the tax itself. We're about in the thirty-five per cent bracket, so I save maybe twenty-eight dollars, not seventy-nine eighty-two. Big deal, saving twenty-eight dollars on a thousand-dollar outlay. A fellow could actually go broke that way if he put his mind to it."

"I've got the beginning of a sick headache already. I'm not going to make it worse fighting with you. I'll start getting ready."

"Why go if you've got a headache? You know boat parties bore me. I wouldn't mind skipping it."

"That's because you don't have enough room to wander on boats."

She started toward the bedroom, then turned to stare at him. "And we'd better go! We received this invitation before your splendid gesture in that Dreyer mess. We haven't received any since. We won't. This will be our last invited appearance in quite a while."

"Oh, for God's sake, stop harping on Dreyer! I did what I had to do, and it's done."

When they got to the Club, they weren't speaking. Al dropped Jean off at the entrance, found a parking place, and walked down to the dock where the party was assembling.

For the evening, the Baldwins had chartered "Nickeroo III," the sleek sixty-foot motor sailer which Nick Carnes had picked up for a song from its near-bankrupt owner and which was, in turn, slowly edging Nick in the same direction.

To Al, boat names betrayed the yachting mind. Usually, they were cute or punny like "Nickeroo," and almost always the Roman numeral II, III, or IV was appended even if the predecessor craft had been little more than rowboats. In this fraternity, there were never new salts, only old salts, which

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was treasonous thinking for a man who had his sights set on becoming Fleet Captain.

Mostly there were the same tired old familiar faces, and Al resigned himself to a rather tedious evening.

Funny thing—Jack Baldwin was a sensitive human being, and you'd think he could have foreseen this was just a social grab-bag, mostly people who had little in common except that once or twice they had invited the Baldwins to their parties.

There were the Ted McDonalds and old Dr. McDonald, but not his wife, who disapproved of boats and cocktail parties alike, sound woman. The Winstons, Joe Amory and his eternal fiancée who had showed up in heels, to Joe's embarrassment and Nick's distress. Jack Lyons had brought along his severely intellectual Vassar consort who disdained the simple esthetics of the Garden Club in favor of the presidency of the Housatonic League of Women Voters.

Al simultaneously heard and saw lumbering Pat McDermott as he exploded onto the dock, his shy, pretty wife in tow. The social cross-currents of Housatonic fascinated Al, and he speculated vainly on how and why the sedate Baldwins had incurred a social obligation to the McDermotts.

Nor could he explain Margie's presence, and he was equally mystified by her escort, a strange, willowy young man, obviously much too willowy to sustain an evening with a woman of Margie's earthy appetites.

Perhaps, after all, the evening sail held promise. As he was helping the women aboard, a heavyset couple hurried awkwardly toward the "Nickeroo III." Al grinned. Yes, this was a party of surprises.

"Ahoy, Ed! I've never seen you as far as the dock before."

Abernathy was puffing heavily as he arrived with Mama and struggled to boost her onto the boat. "Misread those damned bells on the invitation. Thought two bells was five-thirty."

"Still don't understand you taking to the water, Ed."

"Let me get my breath. There. If you belong to a yacht club, you have a duty to go sailing once a year. I don't say

that. Mama does. So I'm here. I'll be all right as long as I don't watch the horizon. Rising and falling, rising and falling. God! I hate to even think about it. Where's the bourbon, do you know?"

"Attention, everyone!" Nick Carnes's usually petulant voice was unexpectedly commanding. "We're about to cast off. Kindly watch the boom. Joe, Joe Amory! Handle the lines for me, will you? You'll need help, too. The wind's a little tricky."

Joe sounded startled. "Aren't you going to take her out under power?"

"Never! Think I'm a stinkpot sailor?"

"Hell, man, we'll be tacking for half an hour before we even get out of the harbor."

"And I'll perish of thirst before they break out the whisky," Abernathy grumbled. "Notice what the sea does to a guy, Al? Ashore, Nick's a quiet little fellow. Sort of a Walter Mitty in my book. But as soon as he gets fooling with those ropes or lines or sheets or whatever he calls them, he's a goddam Captain Bligh."

"Don't worry, Joe. It's coming around. Feel it? We'll clear the harbor in fifteen minutes," Nick called happily.

The mainsail suddenly filled; the "Nickeroo III" kicked ahead.

Jean went aft, joining Nick at the wheel. "Want me to take over?"

"Better wait awhile. Don't want to foul any moorings."

"Pish and tush, Nick Carnes! I can sail as well as any man."

Reluctantly, Nick surrendered the wheel, but remained beside her, chattering constant instructions.

"We have to pick up the first buoy."

"I know, Nick."

"Better start easing off."

"I am."

"Well, don't ease off so damned easily!"

"Shut up, Nick! You're like a back-seat driver."

Well, you should know, Al thought. Anyhow, she was

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happy for the moment. He worked his way forward on the starboard side to where Amory was now standing alone.

"God, Al, how can even the landlubbers help loving this! A clean, cool breeze, the sun going down in the special way it does over the water, the soft, sliding movement."

"I don't think Ed appreciates the last part. He just went below in a hurry."

"A bourbon will settle his stomach if anything can. Oh, and speaking of whisky."

"Yes."

"I want to apologize about your party last week. I was a little tight. Hope I didn't make a horse's ass of myself."

"No, Joe. But you scared the hell out of me for a minute. I thought you were going to blab in front of everybody."

"Oh, I remember that part. And I'm afraid I meant what I said. I'm too old and it's too late, anyhow, for a fight at Housatonic."

"Why is a fight ever too late if it's for the right?"

"Don't be an idealist, boy. Let me tell you a little story, will you?"

"Go ahead, Joe. I'd like to see how you justify defeatism."

"There's a charming little club up the Sound on the Connecticut side, and on the wall hangs a framed story, 'The History of a Yacht Club,' I think they call it. Don't know who wrote it. He could have belonged here.

"It goes like this. Once upon a time, there was a group of fellows who got together and formed their own yacht club. They built a little shack and a little runway, and then one day one of their wives came along and said, 'Wouldn't it be nice if we had a little bar?'

"So they built a snack bar, and then someone thought it would be nice if they held a yearly dance, so they enlarged their little shack. Now, as long as they had a place for dancing, they decided to get a liquor license, and as long as they had that, they might as well have bowling alleys and a wading pool and tennis courts.

"Finally, a few of the fellows said, 'Wouldn't it be nice if we *just* had a yacht club?' So they built a little shack and a



little runway and had a lot of fun, and then one day one of the wives came along and said, 'Wouldn't it be nice if we had a little snack bar?' . . ."

"See what you mean, Joe. You think Housatonic has split up into so many little clublets within the Club that it's hopeless?"

"Something like that. It's long past being a yacht club, God knows."

"You're willing to watch it disintegrate? Those fellows up the line did something positive."

"Sure, and then one of the wives came along! There'll always be wives. Always sticking their noses in and saying, 'Wouldn't it be nice if.'"

"Joe, you talk like a bachelor."

"Hell, boy, things haven't been the same in this country since women's suffrage, and they never will be again."

"Joe! Joe Amory!"

"Ahoy, skipper. I'm up forward."

"Come aft, will you, and spell Jean at the wheel?"

"Aye, aye."

Amory started back. Al, leaning against the starboard rail, made no move. Joe stopped. "Isn't it polite, or precautionary, for husbands to chaperone their wives on boat parties?"

"A bachelor would think of that. Jean can take care of herself. I'm enjoying myself. You know, the clean, cool breeze, the great big Technicolor show the sun puts on exclusively for yachtsmen, that sort of thing."

"You sore at me, Al?"

"Hell, no. I'm just sorry that everything seems to be going to hell in an oversized supermarket basket, and none of us does anything."

Amory shrugged and left.

Only a couple of minutes later, it seemed, Nick was alongside Al. "Jean's looking for you."

The strangely transformed little man was giving him an order, and Al felt irritated. After all, it had been all right for her to wander aft and have fun at the wheel. Now she has nothing special to do, and she won't exert herself to

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make small talk, so I'm supposed to be at her elbow. Hell, he thought disgustedly, she doesn't want a husband, she wants a page boy.

"Al?"

"I'm coming, Nick."

"I'd to talk to you a moment. I'm worried about the Club."

"That makes two of us, but I don't think we can get a quorum."

"I tell you, Al, it's come to a pretty pass! I don't think we'd know what to do if a good sound Protestant yachtsman came along. And you know some of the riff-raff we've taken in."

"You voted on them, Nick."

"This isn't personal. I'm just thinking, if I make Nominating Chairman, as I should—" He caught himself. "I didn't mean it that way. In view of all his years of service, Commodore Peabottom has every right to dictate his successor. No, I didn't mean that, either. To *suggest* his successor."

Al nodded gravely. "'Suggest' is the better word. The Commodore Emeritus himself has frequently said that he is not a dictator. But what were you leading up to?"

"I was just trying to say that I do think my own years of service definitely qualify me for Nominating Chairman."

"I go along with that, Nick."

"Particularly because I have always served where it really counts, the Regatta Committee, Junior and Senior sailing activities, the important things."

"You buy that mystique that yachtsmen are different, don't you?"

"Why, Al, I'm surprised! You should know better. Of course we're different."

"Everybody's different one way or another and pretty damned uppity about it."

"I'm not a snob, Al. Not in the least. I just like the right people, and I have no use for the rest."

"But Housatonic can't survive without the others, the non-Protestants, the nonyachtsmen, to phrase it delicately."

"I suppose not. But I'm disappointed that you seem so concerned about them. Because I wanted to sound you out on something. I often don't understand you, but you're basically sound, and one of us, and this is a time we, people like us, should stick together."

"What the devil are you driving at, Nick?"

"Frankly, if I'm suggested for Nominating Chairman, I would like to offer your name as Fleet Captain. What I mean to say, this isn't binding or official. I'm not chairman yet, and the rest of the committee might overrule me."

"I understand. And I'm very flattered."

Nick's face brightened. "Good! Just an unofficial sounding, shall we say?"

"Completely confidential. Let me ask you one thing. Did you mention this to Peabottom?"

"Naturally, Al. I said, 'Al Babcock may not seem to be completely one of us all the time, but I've watched him closely on the Board, worked closely with him on Admissions. He stood up to the tennis crowd, and he was very sound on the wading pool. *And he does own a boat.*'"

"What did he say?"

"Oh, you know him, Al. He just blew his nose, and that ended it."

Al sighed. That ended it, all right. What you might call a nasal dismissal.

"Thanks, Nick. Thanks a lot. Would you convey my deepest apologies to my good wife, and say I'll be along in a moment? I'm—well, I want to think something out."

The "Nickeroo III" rose and dipped almost in cotillion time to the rhythmic splash of the waves against her bow. Al, staring moodily down at the darkening water, felt the same premonition of trouble that Dreyer had given him way back on Opening Day.

Only this time there was nothing nameless about it. Joe Amory, who had brains and experience, had no guts. Nick, who had unexpected guts when it came to boating matters, had no brains. The nitwit! Talking like that to Peabottom!

If he had kept his mouth shut, Peabottom probably would

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have passed on the toga of Nominating to him and the "suggested" slate of new officers and directors at the same time. But, once on the committee, the little man would stand up even to the Commodore Emeritus in his stubborn loyalty to the good of Housatonic. And if he thought Al as Fleet Captain was good for Housatonic, Al would be nominated.

At least, that was the way that Al had thought and hoped things would work out, but now, barring a miracle, Nick's big mouth had hung himself and Al, too. Goddamn your friends, he thought.

Al started aft, to where most of the party were sprawled in deck chairs. Before he got to Jean, Margie intercepted him. She was correctly nautical in a sleeveless white silk sailor dress trimmed with blue braid and—trust Margie!—a very low V-neck.

"Al, you must meet Horace."

She introduced the willowy young man who lisped an acknowledgment and limply shook Al's hand. He was pale, and there were glistening dots of perspiration on his forehead.

"Isn't he the nicest thing, Al? I met him in an interior decorator's shop in New York."

"It might have been kinder to have left him there, Margie. Oh-oh. Jean's semaphoring to me."

When he joined her, she shook her head in mock resignation to the Ted McDonalds. "Even on a boat, he can find places to wander!"

"Sorry, dear. Nick and Joe and I had a little Club business to talk over."

"It's always Club business! I suppose you're just as bad, Ted McDonald. What I can't understand, with all you brilliant men devoting day and night to Housatonic, why is the Club so shabby?"

Al and Ted exchanged resigned glances. "You'll have to talk to House, dear. And he's not aboard."

Dr. McDonald joined them. "As Fleet Surgeon, I took the precaution of bringing along a bottle of what are popularly called seasickness pills. Present company excepted, of course,

there may be some landlubbers who would feel psychologically reassured by them. You might pass the word."

"Maybe Margie's new boy," Al said. "And I don't know about Ed Abernathy."

Ed, who had been below looking for the bourbon, clambered on deck, drink in hand. "I heard that. Hell, I'm all right. But it's pure sinful the way this seesaw motion slops a drink around."

There was a plaintive expression on his big, rough, good-natured face.

"Another thing, folks. I'm totally confused. Just a minute till I turn my chair around." Carefully, he faced forward so he wouldn't be looking at the pitching rail. "Mechanically, folks, what are the things that make a home? Four walls, floors, a kitchen, and a bathroom. And you can't find one of them, under its proper name, on a boat! I asked Nick where the can was and he hissed, 'Head!' I wanted some ice and figured it would be in the kitchen. But, no, that's the galley. And I find I walk on decks, not floors, and there's another name, I forget, for those vertical separations that normal people call walls. Hell, I don't even know if I'm sitting on a chair."

"Amen to that!" Pat McDermott was grinning expansively. "Sure, the boatmen are a little daft with their funny ways, but it's a grand way of life in spite of them. I think this is the proper place to make an announcement. I have promised my large, loud, and growing family, and my quiet wife here, that next season I will buy them a boat. A big boat!"

Despite what they said behind his back, the Yankees usually surrendered to Pat's infectious good humor when they were actually with him. Now there were loud cheers. Even Jean smiled. Only Abernathy was unenthusiastic.

"Another good man gone wrong," he groaned.

"Sure, you inland, upstate, dry-footed apple picker, what would you know about the water?" Pat answered with mock grandiloquence. "It's in my blood. The Irish, some say, discovered the seas, though that may be a bit of an overstatement, even for the Irish."

► *Friday, August 5*

"I say, welcome aboard, Pat!" Nick exclaimed. His face narrowed suspiciously. "Not a stinkpot? *Pat!* Promise, not a stinkpot."

Pat sheepishly shrugged his big shoulders. "I pleaded with them, Nick. I told the brats that if only they would first learn the ways of the winds, the tides, and the currents under sail, as their ancestors did, then later they could handle anything. Stinkpots would be child's play."

"Exactly the way to put it."

"But it's a horsepower-crazy age. You know what they answered me? 'Gee, Dad,' they said, 'you want us to finish college before we go to high school?' Be sporting now, Nick. There's logic in the observation."

"Oh, dear!" Nick's intensity was comical. "Another stinkpot, after all. We might as well turn the dockhouse into a drive-in service station."

As at any landbound cocktail party, there was a restless ebb and flow of movement. Nick went aft to take over from Amory. Jean and Dr. McDonald drifted to the port rail, and she began telling him, as she did every time they met, about her headaches.

Al had the opportunity to get Pat aside, but before he opened his mouth, the big Irishman shook his head decisively. "I know what's up. Amory put out a feeler to me. I don't want any trouble stirring up at the Club."

"You know what they're doing to me. You sat on Admissions and you know it's wrong."

"I know you're an honest, sincere man, if that's what you mean."

"More than that! It's unjust, and I've got just enough Irish in me to come out fighting over an injustice." He paused a moment. Then there was a challenge in his voice. "What about you? How do you feel about injustice?"

Pat sighed uncomfortably. "I'm against it, of course. This will sound strange, and you don't have enough Irish in you to understand. But there are rare occasions when the Irish don't want to fight. Even over an injustice."

Al's eyebrows arched.

"Hell, I can't explain it myself, Al. It's like trying to explain a retreat to a left-footer. But we're not a bunch of hod-carrying, spit-in-your-eye Micks, Al! I know I'm not very smooth, but a lot of second-, third-, and fourth-generation Irish are, and I'm getting damned tired of the label. We try to think things through logically, like anyone else."

"And what do you think?"

"I think there are already too many groups, too many tensions at Housatonic. One more would tear the damned place apart. I think you ought to take your licking like a man."

Suddenly, the big, ruddy face was contrite. "I'm sorry, Al. I didn't mean that last crack."

"I think you did. But that's all right. It's something I hadn't thought about as much as I should have."

"I overheard, gentlemen, and I must say you are both wrong." Having applied himself conscientiously to the bourbon, Abernathy was now in oracular mood. "Whilst we thus bicker among ourselves, something bigger and more menacing is happening to clubs. All good clubs, anyhow. It is the gunpoint togetherness that is being forced on us by the liberal wolf packs. God, I can scramble metaphors as well as any man who ever went to Harvard. Well, no matter."

Pat squirmed as though religion or sex had come into the conversation. "Ed, maybe you ought to take it easy on the bourbon."

"Shh, my big Irish friend, you've done a lot of talking. Now let me say something. I have had a terrible Orwellian seizure about what's going to happen to clubs."

His voice dropped to a melodramatic whisper. "I see an elderly, dignified gentleman in banker's gray business suit. He sidles alongside a second distinguished-looking gentleman who is standing on a street corner. Out of the side of his mouth, he whispers, 'Don't forget tonight. We meet in Joe's rumpus room.' Then he quickly moves away. Business conspirators? Political plotters? Hell, no! This is how clubs may be forced underground long before 1984. That is, unless we stand up now to the Jack Lyonses within us, the politicians

► *Friday, August 5*

outside, and the professional do-gooders who want to make all private clubs one great big democratic mishmash."

"And they call the Irish belligerent," Pat said. "You're a man with a blackball in each eye."

"And four more in his pockets," Al added.

"No, a prophet. I can see it happening to Housatonic, and the Club going down, down, down."

Al felt suddenly depressed and irritable. Amory, Nick, Pat, all no help to him, and now Ed talking like a drunken Cassandra. Was he a Cassandra? Or just drunk? The hell with it either way! He'd had a bellyful of Club talk. They'd be docking shortly, and then there would be Jean's reproaches about his wandering.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said shortly. "I need a double Scotch."

By now, almost everyone was crowding along the port rail to watch the lights of Housatonic City rising out of the water. He descended to the deserted galley. As he was mixing the drink, someone slipped up behind and squeezed close against him, nipping his ear.

"I've got to see you, AL."

"Margie, this is most irregular. We shouldn't be down here alone."

"Damn your irregularity!" The passion in her voice startled him. "You sound like—like one of those TV patent-medicine ads about irregularity."

She spun him around, thrusting close against him. Desperately, he attempted a diversion. "Where's your piece of bric-a-brac from the decorator's shop?"

She nodded toward a forward bunk. Al heard a faint groan.

"He'll be all right. He's as good now as he ever will be. To me."

Her hands dug into his back. "I need you, Al, badly."

"Margie, don't! Jean. The others. Please! Someone will come below."

"I don't care."

He tried to push her away, but her arms were unexpectedly



strong. He heard a noise and broke her hold. Jean came in just in time to see Margie stagger back.

There was a moment's silence.

She looked at Al, then at Margie, and back at Al again, this time looking through him. "I might have known. Even on a sixty-foot motor sailer, the two of you couldn't behave."

She turned and went quickly topside.

"Thanks, Margie. Thanks for a lot of nothing. That really did it."

"I'm sorry, Al. I really am. But it will blow over."

"Yes, I'm sure."

On the ride home, Jean sat rigid and aloof. Al had braced himself for a scene as soon as they were alone. He didn't quite know how to handle silence.

"I can explain," he said tentatively.

"There's no need to."

"Well, I want to!"

"Explain away my eyesight?"

"It wasn't my fault, Jean. Margie's a bitch."

"I'm sure you made that happy discovery some time ago."

"Look, I was attacked."

"You must have an incredible opinion of my intelligence."

As they swung into their driveway, she said, "Let me out at the front door. Then you can put the car in the garage—or go back to her. I'm sure I don't give a damn."

He stopped halfway up the driveway near the door and followed her into the house. "Jean, I have a right to be heard!"

She ran quickly up the front stairs, and a moment later the bedroom door slammed.

Well, the hell with her! There were times when marriage was neither sad nor funny nor real, but just plain, undiluted soap opera. In all honesty, there had been that night with Margie that he wanted to forget. Tonight, though, was a bum rap—and, by God, she *would* listen!

He went into the kitchen, got out an ice tray, and made himself a double Scotch. He drained the glass in two long

► *Friday, August 5*

swallows and slowly climbed the stairs to their room. He walked in without knocking.

"Get out of here!" Her voice was almost a scream.

"You're going to listen to me, Jean, if it's for the last time. I did not encourage Margie. I was pushing her away—you must have seen that. I won't hear any more about her! I did what I had to in the Dreyer mess, I won't hear any more about that, either!"

"You're in no position to give any ultimatums. You've ruined us socially, and now you're making me a laughingstock with your carryings-on. At least, you could be discreet."

"Discreet! It isn't me, love, that really matters. It's status—and your pride. Why, if I were laying Sally and was discreet about it and it helped your social ambitions, you really wouldn't give a damn. Tell the truth, now!"

"You're being disgusting."

"Maybe I am, but you're avoiding the question. Now I'll go to the second question. Did you ever really love me?"

"I wonder!"

"So do I. I think—maybe it was subconsciously, to give you the benefit of the doubt—that you really married me because it gave you a leg up socially. Then you found that Grandma Kate was an obstacle, and you never forgave me."

"Don't mention her name to me!"

"And then this Dreyer business came along, and you can't forgive me for that, either."

"You betrayed me!"

"The hell I did. But the important thing is this. In these two crises, what I felt didn't matter. Only what the 'right people' felt meant anything to you. So I'll answer for you. You never have really loved me!"

"All right! All right! What of it?"

"Just this—I'm fed up to the eyebrows with your phony set of values, with our constant bickering, with everything!"

"And I am totally fed up with you."

"There's our answer. You will be the first to admit that I am, along with my other drawbacks, a dreadful social liabili-

ty. If I clear out, all the onus will be on me, and you, Sally, all the 'right people' can live happily ever after."

"You mean divorce?"

"Yes. I'll leave the grounds up to you and I hope—considering the kids—you will be decent enough to make them fashionably vague. Mental cruelty, probably. Get any lawyer—except Peabottom, Hardy & Ling!—and he can work out all the details."

He expected tears, but she was dry-eyed. "The house?"

"It's yours. And everything in it, except Dad's books and shaving mug."

"Liz will still go to college, and Dick will be taken care of?"

"Of course! Of course! And you'll get adequate support."

"All right. I don't think there's anything else to say."

Al turned and went downstairs. He needed another double-duty Scotch if he expected any sleep.

You're a coward, running away, he told himself, or you have a hell of a lot more guts than you thought you did. Either way, it was pretty nightmarish, and he racked his brains to figure out how he had gotten into this bind.

The only thing that came to mind was that inevitable line heard in all bad movies: *I never thought it would come to this!* He tossed off his drink and went to bed.

AUGUST
MONDAY
15

Usually, without bothering Al, Miss Meredith knew which visitors to admit to his office, which ones to dismiss with the threadbare plea that he was in conference. This morning, as she knocked lightly and entered, she looked doubtful.

"There's a lady outside to see you. Nicely dressed, dark-complexioned. She says it's personal. A Mrs. Dreyer."

"Helen. I mean Mrs. Joseph Dreyer. Show her right in, Agnes."

Oh, dear, Miss Meredith thought, he drinks, and I don't think he gets along very well with that selfish wife of his, but there has never been any *scandal* in the Babcock family. Oh, what would old Mr. Babcock think!

Al rose and went to the threshold to meet Helen, then firmly closed the door in Agnes' worried face. He escorted her to the big, old-fashioned black leather sofa that had belonged to his father and sat down beside her.

"How nice, Helen. I call on you, and you return the call. I'm sorry my ceiling isn't covered with whatever-you-call-it, but this is less businesslike than sitting across the desk from each other."

"Perhaps we should, Al. I've really come on business. I should have phoned first, but I didn't have the nerve."

"Am I so formidable?"

"It isn't that. I have a favor to ask, and I feel a little embarrassed about asking it."

"Anything."

"Al, I need a job. I didn't know who else to ask."

"But why? You've got a lovely house." He paused imperceptibly. "And a successful husband."

"I just want a job, that's all."

"What can you do? Type? Take dictation?"

"No. But I had a year at law school. I know something about the legal side of insurance. Not much. But I could take courses."

"I don't get it, Helen. First, why you want a job. Second, if you do, why not Peabottom, Hardy & Ling?"

She colored and in spite of herself, tears came to her eyes. This man was so exasperating! He could be considerate and obtuse at the same time. Now he was making her humble herself, say openly what he should have assumed.

"I didn't want to say it. But Joe and I aren't getting along."

"I'm sorry."

"I want to be independent. Is that wrong?"

"No. But pretty damned impractical."

"Why?"

Al suddenly felt angry. Not at Helen, but at the situation she was letting herself in for. Like Margie, she would be one of the most hotly pursued women in town. Just the thought of it made him a little jealous.

"I'll tell you why. Housatonic has somewhat primitive ideas about estranged ladies." His voice was harsh. "If you want my advice, stick with Dreyer or move out of this town into a bigger, more sophisticated city."

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry, Helen. I didn't mean to sound so rough. But you're much too nice, too sweet to be considered *déclassée* by our 'right people.'"

"Mrs. Winters seems to survive."

"Let's not talk about Margie. Please!"

"All right, but let's be frank. There's really one reason, just one, why I wouldn't be accepted, couldn't get a decent job. And it's not an estrangement, is it? Housatonic seems tolerably sophisticated that way."

► Monday, August 15

Her voice was throbbing with indignation. By now, he had to know that she was Jewish. Yet he had never mentioned it—in the tactful way that people so heavily-handedly pretend to overlook a physical handicap. Maybe, from his prejudiced point of view, he even pitied her. That would be intolerable. "Tell me the truth, Al. I know you know about it. It's my being Jewish, isn't it?"

"Stop it, Helen. I'm so tired of talk about race, religion, race, religion, race, religion! Everybody is so damned defensive about his church or his ancestors or the color of his skin. Half of us seem to spend half our time apologizing to the other half."

"Nobody in Housatonic apologizes to me for anything. I was just thinking, maybe the nice people—like you—feel sorry for me. Oh, I couldn't stand that! Not from you, Al."

"Of course, I don't pity you. But I wish you'd give us Christians a little time, not crowd us quite so much."

"Am I a pushy Jew, Al?"

"No, no, no! But look. Just back as far as my grandfather—he was a Connecticut man first, and Washington was a long ways off, and the country sort of came second. For some reason, he never even accepted New Jersey. Ohio, of course, was all right, having once been owned and originally settled by Connecticut folks."

"How quaint."

"Dammit, don't be flip. I'm trying to say that we've pretty much outgrown this geographical parochialism. Now we're gradually taking the next step."

"And you ask me to sit quietly in the corner until you can bring yourself to accept me? No, thanks! To the southerners, pride seems to be the mark of quality, and the Irish are always almost bragging about their tempers. Well, we Jews have pride, too! Even if you—you *goyim*—prefer to call it brass."

"Helen, Helen! You're the last person in the world I want to wrangle with."

"Shouldn't you say that only about your wife?"

He got up abruptly from the sofa and stared down at her.

"I've broken up with Jean. For good. And the kids will go with her. That's the hard part."

"Oh, All! No! You should have told me. I wouldn't have bothered you with my problems." She rose, too. "I'm sorry. I'd better go now."

"Don't, Helen."

"I must. You've given me quite a few things to think over."

"I'll see you again? Soon? I like talking to you. Even when we disagree. And I'll try to have some practical ideas instead of losing my temper."

He grinned. "If I say something, will you promise not to lose yours?"

"Of course."

"You know the trouble with you Jews? Like the Old Testament prophets, you *scold* too much."

After she had left, Al sauntered to his window and looked down until he saw her trim form emerge from the building and disappear around the corner. It was preposterous, but he was falling in love with this proud woman. And she felt something for him. She must. Proud as she was, she had appealed to him in her moment of trouble, and that meant something, didn't it?

Supposing it did. You're going too far too fast, Babcock. Housatonic would never tolerate an alliance like that. If, if he went any further, he'd have to take the advice he had given her. Get out of town. Sell the business, say goodbye to the Club and—worst of all—to Liz and Dick.

"Mr. Babcock. Mr. Babcock?"

"Oh, sorry, Agnes. I was woolgathering."

"I was just wondering. Did you want me to put down another appointment for Mrs. Dreyer?"

"No, thanks. This is something I will have to follow through on personally."

Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, *dear!* Why had this strange woman left in such a hurry, her eyes red, too, and why was Mr. Babcock mooning at the window? Oh, if only old Mr. Babcock were here to straighten his son out.

► *Tuesday, August 23*

"I—"

"Yes, Agnes?"

"Oh, nothing, sir. There's a considerable amount of dictation when you care to put your mind to it."

Her voice was strongly disapproving.

► *Chapter Twenty*

AUGUST
TUESDAY
23

Executive, which had skipped its July meeting, had met last night, the fourth Monday of the month, and Al was sure that Peabottom must have magisterially handed down a "suggestion" for his successor as Chairman of the Nominating Committee.

Al was dying to know the result. His Club career hung on the decision, yet he couldn't bring himself to call anyone. It was pride, but he wondered, too, how many real friends he had left on the Board. The word would get around town immediately, and surely someone would call.

Tuesday was the day he generally went calling on clients, but this morning, making vague excuses to Agnes, he puttered about in the office, close to the phone.

It was almost noon when Abernathy called. His voice, usually carelessly good-humored, was sympathetic. Al knew before he spoke.

"I just heard, Al. Bad news. Peabottom passed over his



running dog, Nick. His successor will be Lyons. That liberal ass!"

"I tried to live in hope to the end, but it figures, Ed. The old man doesn't reward his friends. He punishes his enemies. This, of course, is getting back at me so that I won't make Fleet Captain."

"I don't care, Al. You did the right thing, blackballing Dreyer."

"And so did you, backing me up."

"Now, I never said that, Al."

"I know! I know! The second two blackballs may be suspected, but they'll never be known. Only mine is out in the open, even if Board business is supposed to be sacredly confidential."

He laughed bitterly. "In no time, when people ask, why didn't Babcock make Fleet Captain, I'll be type-cast as the anti-Semitic villain of Housatonic. Good excuse for passing me over. And our good members will buy it. Funny, isn't it? They want anti-Semitism—but not anti-Semites."

"Don't quit, Al."

"Nothing else to do. And don't you be too friendly. If you keep your distance, you may be next Admissions Chairman, God help you. But do it, Ed. Do it for the old blue and white."

"Know something? I'm just mean, stupid, and prejudiced enough so I might do that very thing. Mr. Chairman, *ave atque vale*—and it was a hell of a fight you put up in the arena. So long, Al."

"So long, Ed. We did have fun in a gruesome way."

He had scarcely cradled the phone when Miss Meredith called him on the intercom. Her voice was severe. "That Mrs. Dreyer is calling."

"Well, for heaven's sake, put her on, Agnes!"

"Certainly, Mr. Babcock, if you say so."

"Al? I must see you."

"Let me pick you up. At the house? I'll be right over."

Together, they drove out along the sea wall that led toward Housatonic Yacht and Tennis, then parked. She turned to-

► Tuesday, August 23

ward him. There was both hurt and tenderness in her eyes. "I know the trouble I've caused you at your Club, Al. I'm very sorry about it."

Al started to interrupt.

"No, let me talk. I couldn't help being born the way I was—and I don't mean to apologize for it. But I did try to talk Joe out of applying for membership. I knew there'd be trouble. I guess—I guess I should have asked him to join. Then he would have done the opposite to spite me."

The tears welled, and Al hastily got out a handkerchief. "Blow your nose. What do you mean?"

"From the beginning, things were never basically right with us. I think you can guess the kind of man he is. Now I've finally made my decision. Not an estrangement, I'm definitely divorcing him. I have the grounds, God knows."

Al tried to keep his voice noncommittal. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Aren't you happy? You can let him in now, and get at least one problem off your mind."

Al was surprised. "Didn't he tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"He's been rejected. Flatly. Blackballed."

"I didn't know! And that's the kind of thing he likes to throw up in my face."

"But you weren't the cause, Helen. Believe me, you weren't!"

"I'd like to, but it *is* a little hard to believe."

"Dammit, woman, in a crazy, reverse-English way, your Jewishness actually helped him!"

"Come, Al. It's one thing to try to spare my feelings, but this is just too much."

"Will you keep still and let me tell you the story?"

He told her how he had opposed Dreyer for what he was, how her being Jewish had been used to make Al himself look anti-Semitic. "So, if you had left him a few weeks ago, you couldn't have been used in this gamey little piece of Christian politics. I could have blocked him, as I did, and still kept my own place. It's too late for that now."

"Oh, All I am sorry! So *dreadfully* sorry! If only I'd had the strength to make up my mind sooner. The way I should have."

"Now, don't start getting a fashionable guilt complex. That's for the psychiatrists and tranquilizer people. I only wanted to relieve your mind a little. As a Jew, you don't carry plague germs, or something."

"I seem to, as far as you're concerned."

"No! Look at it this way. I've spent my life at that Club. If a phony story and a few weeks—a few lousy weeks!—make that much difference, it was a pretty shaky life there. Well, wasn't it? *Helen.*"

He moved across the steering wheel toward her.

"No, Al."

He tried to put his arm around her.

"No!"

She pushed him away.

"I want to kiss you."

"No!"

She shrank back toward the door.

"Dammit, woman, stop talking like an Admissions chairman. I love you!"

"No."

"Yes."

"How *could* you, really? We've only known each other this summer."

"I don't know myself. But I do. I remember the first time we met, on Opening Day, I liked you. Each time after that, I liked you more. Now I just keep thinking about you. All the time."

"No. You're hurt and confused, and you're breaking up with your wife, and you're temporarily insane. Yes, that's it. Temporarily insane."

"All right. I plead insanity. Permanent insanity as far as you're concerned. It's as good a definition of love as I know. Now will you kiss me?"

"No!"

She pushed him away again. "I'm hurt and confused, too,

► Tuesday, August 23

Al. And, right now, I don't like Christians. Especially Christian men. Beasts! That's what you are!"

"Now who's being prejudiced? You came to me when you were in trouble. You must have felt something."

"Oh, Al, I like you so much. But what do you want of me? Our lives, our backgrounds are so different!"

"I want you to love me."

"Maybe I could—but that Club of yours, you love *that*; you belong there. No, Lieutenant Pinkerton. I won't play your little Yiddish Cho-Cho-San."

"Forget it! This is America. And so it was an ocean race. My ancestors came in sail, yours in coal, and we beat you to Ellis Island by maybe half a century. That's all. What in Christ's name does that matter now?"

"Half a century? I thought your people came over on the 'Speedwell' or the 'Arabella' or something."

"That's the side of the family we talk about. On that side, there's an old Yankee Indian fighter from Massachusetts somewhere in my genealogy. But I'm part Irish, too."

"So what do the Irish and the Jews have in common?"

"Goddam you! A persecution complex, for one thing."

"You don't. You're too Yankee ornery."

"I'm not. I'm mixed up. Ethnically schizophrenic, that's what. I fall in the middle between two stools, the Wasps and the Catholics. Probably why I brag a little about the Yankee side. And you! You harp so much about your Jewishness, maybe there's a little Christian blood somewhere you're ashamed of."

"Never!"

"Ah-ah, no intolerance now."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"All right. But, say what you want about the Yankees, they have one utterly practical virtue. Their sense of survival. If I were pure, cold-fish Yankee, would I be willing to kick over *everything* for you? Not only the damned Club, but my business, the town I was born in. And I will, gladly."

"It's no good. What about your children? You really love Liz. You're proud of Dick."

"I know. That's the roughest part. But I won't have them, anyhow."

"It's still no good!"

The passion in her voice dismayed him.

"After Joe, I feel a little shopworn. He was amused—he has that kind of sense of humor—to see me rebelling against Judaism. He encouraged it. I didn't realize it, but underneath the archaic outward forms that I resented in Judaism, there was a thing of value, and I threw that away, too. Joe gave me nothing in its place."

"Funny that you should use that phrase, 'thing of value.' I like it. It differentiates the real from the phony. Will you marry me?"

"No. There must have been something deeply, basically wrong with your marriage that I had nothing to do with. Please, *please*, don't use me as a parachute so you can bail out your own self-respect. I couldn't take that. I like you too much."

Al pounded his hands on the wheel in frustration. "What are you going to do?"

"Go back to Long Island where I belong."

"Now I say no."

"That's what you advised me. And what else? Did you think up some practical ideas?"

Al sighed. "No. There's nothing in Housatonic. For either of us. Can I see you on the Island?"

"Not for a while."

"Later?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But what's the use if we don't plan to marry? And would you agree to intermarriage?"

"What's that?"

"One or the other, husband or wife, converts to the other's faith."

"I couldn't become a Jew."

"And I don't want to become a Christian."

"Then what about mixed marriage? You go to synagogue on Saturday if you want to. And Sunday, well, we'll just stay home together."

► *Monday, September 5/Labor Day*

"Even if we aren't religious people, there are too many pulls and tugs." She hesitated, coloring slightly. "And, well, in case of children, it isn't fair to them."

"You don't have to tell me, dear." His voice was gentle. "I was the son of a mixed marriage. Mother and Dad had their pulls and tugs. Especially my mother. But they were far happier together than they would have been apart."

"But what do we have to build on, Al?"

"Isn't love 'a thing of value' to build on?"

"I don't know. I guess—let me think."

"Where will I find you?"

"You can leave a message with my brother, Jack Lang, in Brooklyn. I don't remember the number; you'll have to look it up." She laughed, a little sadly. "He's listed as an attorney. You'd better start getting used to it, Al. As we say, my brother, the lawyer."

"I'll drive you home."

"You are sweet, Al. I hope you understand. Be a little patient with me."

► *Chapter Twenty-one*

SEPTEMBER
MONDAY
5
Labor Day

Always to Al, Labor Day, the end of the season for Housatonic Yacht and Tennis, was a mournful occasion. It was the autumnal goodbye to sailing, tennis, swimming, beach parties, and all the careless fun before the Club settled down to its long, lonely winter's sleep.

The blue phlox and white candytuft that had so brightly spelled out the Club colors under the flagpole were now a vague, weedy green, and wherever he looked, HY&T was shabby from the summer's wear and tear. The clubhouse badly needed painting; some of the sun-faded beach umbrellas were torn; in front of the snack bar was a muddy pool where so many Pepsis had been spilled.

Despite his earlier budgetary boasts, Jack Lyons had long since run out of money for tennis, and the courts showed it. The base and alley lines were almost as dirty a brown as the court surfaces. Some of the nets sagged; much of the high backstop wire was ripped and rusting.

Even the sounds made by the sportsmen were muted, elegiac. From the courts, the *pong-pong-pong* of the smashes was a bit soggy now. The balls were getting dead, and apparently nobody had bothered to buy new ones. Only a few exhibitionists were splashing around in the pool. Launch service had already been curtailed, and the boats in the harbor, though crowding color for Housatonic's seasonal death, were uncharacteristically quiet.

In one way, the mournful sights and sounds were appropriate. Al was saying his own private goodbye to Housatonic, and the death of the season was a variation on a theme—a sad September variation on the death of his own life there, the end of all good times and old friendships.

This ruptured summer. This doubly, totally, utterly ruptured summer that had begun with such deceptive promise.

He wandered alone from the courts to the pool to the dock to the Mall. The word had gone out about him. He was dead. He sensed the withdrawal.

The Johnstones, dowdy, child-centered couple, greeted him effusively. But then they would always be the last to hear what was happening within Housatonic.

"Good to see you, Al," Jack Lyons said. Then he saw someone in the distance who was important and moved on. Paul Ling just nodded.

As everybody says, I could write a book, Al thought sourly. But I can see the reviews. "Mr. Babcock is painfully

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autobiographical. Unfortunately, he shows a spotty comprehension of club life and the insurance business. . . ."

"All!" The genuine warmth in the voice startled him. It was Ed Abernathy.

"Keep your distance," Al warned. "I'm infectious."

"Balls! I hate to see you moping alone. Let's have a drink."

"Maybe later, Ed, if you don't mind."

"All right. But moderation could be the ruination of this club, as you ought to know from the House reports."

Al grinned politely and started on. Ed's heavy hand clutched him by the shoulder. "Wait a minute, Hamlet. Remember my Orwellian prophecy on that miserable boat party?"

Al nodded.

"I think I have the thing figured out now, Al. Lots of things and people I don't particularly like. Raw carrots, Jews, Negroes. That's just a quick cross-section, but it gives you the idea."

Most of his life, Al had pushed aside the problem of Jews as one of those dreary things, like smoking and lung cancer. He had only reacted. Reacted equally against Paul Ling's flagrant anti-Semitism and Jack Lyons' all-embracing pro-Semitism.

But how did he himself feel? He had to face up squarely to it. Helen, dammit, had forced that on him. He wanted to marry her, and a marriage entered into with reservations or resentments, he knew, was a marriage cursed from the start.

He remembered Ed twitting him that the Arrow Collar man was Al's ideal of the clubman. Maybe so. Given his parochial boyhood environment, it was perfectly natural, and he was damned if he'd make apologies for it. But he could open his eyes, so as to recognize and guard against the slant he had received early in life.

Someplace recently he had read the statement of a religious group that individuals, not races or peoples, marry, and that that was the important thing. He was going to marry the woman he loved—the only woman he really had ever loved—



and whatever the world said, he truly didn't give a damn whether she was Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or—Zoroastrian, for that matter!

He turned to Abernathy, who was still talking.

"Ed, you've got something there. For you, I mean. Maybe we'll have that drink later."

"Al Babcock! Where *have* you been?"

He cringed. It was Margie.

"I haven't seen you since—well, I haven't seen you since the boat party." Her tone was reproachful. "I called you two or three times at your office. But that old Miss what's-her-name always said you were out. Were you?"

"Of course, Margie. But, well, you know about Jean and me, I guess?"

She nodded sadly, but her tone was hopeful. "It wasn't me, was it, Al? I'd feel dreadfully responsible."

"No. Just one of those things."

"Al?" She smiled a we've-got-a-secret smile and he thought, oh God, she isn't going to reminisce, is she? "Remember what I told you about that Dreyer woman?"

Her voice was viciously triumphant. "And you did block them, Al. You did!"

You silly girl, he thought. You and Joe Dreyer were just made for each other, and you helped, you think, to keep him out. I ought to tell you what you missed.

He managed to disentangle himself from her and wandered back to the Cellar. It was deserted.

Margie was the last straw of the season. Pure Anglo-Saxon, and what else did she have running for her? Loose, stupid, and vicious. How could anyone in his right mind compare her with Helen?

Yet, with its upside-down values, Housatonic could tolerate Margie, yet would never accept Helen. Intermarriage, mixed marriage, they both sounded so dreary. But was there any possible choice between the two women? Life with Helen would be pulls and tugs. Some nasty ones, too. But with Margie it would be impossible.

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"The usual, please, Mike. Oh, and may I have a sheet of club paper and an envelope?"

While Mike was making the drink, Al went over to the far corner where Admissions had so often sat and happily argued. He began to write:

The Directors  
Housatonic Yacht and Tennis Club

Gentlemen:

In view of certain unexpected changes in my domestic and business arrangements, I find that it is necessary to remove from Housatonic.

Mike brought the drink over, and Al casually covered the letter with his arm. When Mike had reluctantly left, he continued:

While I would like to continue on a Non-Resident basis, I fear that this would be impractical, and with your kind permission, I would prefer to transfer my Membership Bond to my wife Jean, so that she and the children may continue to enjoy the Club.

May I express my deep appreciation for the many years of good fellowship and pleasure that I have enjoyed, and wish old Housatonic the fairest of winds in the years ahead.

Sincerely,

Alvin Babcock

Al sealed the letter, addressed the envelope to Ted McDonald as Club Secretary, and handed it to Mike.

"And, Mike, I guess I'll have one for the road."

Al tossed the drink off quickly. He reached across the bar to shake hands. Mike was startled.

"So long, Mike. I'll be seeing you. I hope."

He walked up past the porte-cochere, not looking back, and out to the parking lot. Behind him, the familiar noises faded to sad, far-off echoes, then silence, and he felt a strange disembodiment as the ritual of death was completed.

Who was Al Babcock, anyhow? The Everyman of a prophetic modern morality play that would not, could not be denied in the years to come? Or just a particular, individual entity caught in currents too strong for him to resist? He didn't know. He knew he had only one thing to hold on to.

He got into his car, drove back toward town along the sea wall, and finally reached the Turnpike. He cut sharply onto the access road that led to the westbound lanes and New York.



## ONE JEW? ONE NEGRO?

Before it was over old friendships were dissolved, new social alignments formed. Liberal and conservative elements had erupted into open warfare, a marriage had gone on the rocks....

For what? Because a man's club is his own private castle and not a social organism which should contain all the elements in a community? Or, if the latter, in what proportions?

## ONE JEW? ONE NEGRO?

Where did you draw the line? If you let in one, wouldn't there be a deluge? If you didn't, could you ever again pretend to believe that all men are created equal?

This is a disturbing novel. It will shake you out of your complacency. For, whichever your view, you will never believe in it wholly again.